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A Champion in  
the Seventies



# A Champion In the Seventies

By  
Edith A. Barnett



Chicago  
Herbert S. Stone & Co.  
1898

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## PREFACE

If ever it be justifiable to tell a true story of life, it is when the telling may quell lively dissensions, or explain present-day actions now grievously misunderstood.

And if ever it be possible to tell a true story of life, it is when the teller, once a hot combatant, is, in the course of nature, shifted into the reserves, keen still to watch the progress of the fight, but quietly remote from any chance of being called out to share it. The teller must have been a partisan, or nothing will be known of either side of the strife; must have grown past partisanship, or nothing will be known of any side but one.

Kindly nature, as time rolls on, forces each one of us into sympathy with the men and women of each succeeding growth. All we must do is to cultivate a lively memory, lest we forget our old lessons while we con the new. The chief regret is that we may not wait till the very end of life to write our stories; that when the cup of experience is filled to the brim, the frail porcelain or the rough earthenware (there are both materials among us writers) is sure to shatter and spill. So that here, as elsewhere, is a balance of drawbacks; writing too young, I shall not know all; waiting till too old, *finis* will not be written according to my intention.

We English are twitted with our readiness for compromise; yet, when one looks over the field of past battles, it is more and not less of the spirit of compromise that one fain would see. If Primus could but have peeped for a moment through Secundus' eyes; could but have guessed in what strange guise he himself appeared; could but have known that in Secundus' eyes (and he does not keep a pair for change) there were unholy growths at his back, and a suspicion of cleavage in the foot planted so firmly forward on mother earth! When Primus looks in the glass, those growths have the appearance of budding wings, and the foot is that of a hero; and for my part, standing as I do midway between the two, that is what they look most like to me. But what is the good of talking? It was Primus

himself who taught Secundus to fight valiantly against the devil in all his shapes and disguises whenever he was sure he saw him. Seeing is believing. And truth, before now, has lain with a minority of one.

This much seems to me to be certain; the historian of his or her own time should at least wait till bitterness of mind has passed. There is always the other side. Those who see both sides have a chance of being right; those who see but one side have a certainty of being wrong. We all know how easy it is to grow up ignorant of such a physical defect as blindness of one eye; they who have never seen the world rounded off by normal double vision must needs believe that all things to all men are flat; and the mood that follows when the oculist assures them of their error must be rather of the nature of verbal assent than of innermost conviction.

And this one thing seems first to bear in mind. Both sides meant well. All strove for the best as each saw it. Neither adversary was wholly base; had one been so, he would have been so speedily vanquished that there would have been no conflict worth telling of. And neither adversary was wholly noble; had one been that, the issue of the conflict would never for a moment have been doubtful. But the fault was not wickedness, but rather stupidity; what they lacked, what we all lack, was not good-will, but rather wisdom. And the stupidest action of all the many that we commit is to fancy that our party collectively, or that any one of us individually, may hold a monopoly of truth.

After all, I cannot find it in me to regret the war. This is a fighting world, and the one unpardonable sin is laziness. But when, in telling this story of the early campaign, I import therein any bitterness of feeling, then and in so far, I have failed to do what I intended.

That victory will be for the right I do not for one moment doubt. Nor am I doubtful on which side the balance of right hangs. A judge may be impartial, yet, when all the stories have been heard, he should have his clear opinion as to the verdict that the jury should return.

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# A Champion in the Seventies

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## CHAPTER I

### THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

The family means ten of them, children of a country gentleman, owner of his few acres, and of Benscote Manor. Twenty years ago it was as retired a spot as you could now find treble the distance from London. Seven miles away, measured on a good turnpike road, or three miles in the opposite direction, over a rough, hilly track, was a railway station; small wayside stations both, with very few stopping trains. Half-way there, at the top of the long hill, are the church and the vicarage, and down a lane, notable for the hot perennial strife between the parish and the squire as to its privacy or publicity, is the Hall, empty for two-thirds of the year. All these things have now been brought nearer to the rush of life.

Mr. Vassie had inherited his house and his income, and his favourite virtue was content with things as they are. So, as the elder girls grew up, they were rather tightly packed in the low, small rooms, and there was not much chance of movement, for of course there were three servants and a man out of doors; to say that is only another way of saying that the Vassies



were gentlefolks according to their own rigid standard. Mr. Vassie spent most of his time shut up in his own room, which looked out on a part of the garden where the children never played games.

No one was admitted except for urgent business. There was a legend in the family that papa was always engaged in study, and the room where he carried on these occult performances was dignified by that name. There were books round the walls; a casual observer would have said that there were many books; only close inspection showing that the backs of some of them were shams, cupboard doors with a literary trimming. That should, I think, be shocking to no idea. It passes my comprehension to understand why steady perusal of antique history or of bound volumes of forgotten periodicals should be supposed to be more valuable to the father of a family of growing boys and girls than a capacious cupboard, where he may keep old fishing tackle and last year's newspapers. Mr. Vassie had not placed those cupboards himself; the names on the books' backs could prove that. He had altered next to nothing in all the house. But had the history been modern, what good would it have done him, except that it kept him quiet and amused, which in his wife's eyes was the first consideration in life for a man of means, and for girls of all ages; in fact, for all persons, except for boys in term time and for busy mothers of families? In my opinion it is better to read the daily paper, or to go to sleep, than to spend time and money in buying learned treatises that lead down a blind alley. And Mr. Vassie did not reproduce in writing his thoughts on what he read; he was not specially well able to read the signs of his own times by the light of what has gone before; he did not communicate his views, profound though they may have

been, to his children; nor, I may in parenthesis add, to his rare visitors: the boys did not care to hear, and girls, so Mr. Vassie thought, are better without much knowledge.

But girls' humble capacity fitly ministers to parental learning. Mr. Vassie belonged to a library, and once a fortnight, all the year round, his books were fetched from that station, three miles off, by three of the girls, carrying them turn and turn about. There were philosophical and historical works, which often arrived uncut, but always departed cut. Or should I rather say that Mr. Vassie and his family believed them to be cut? Once upon a time Mr. Vassie held forth at some length upon the acute logic and deep learning displayed in a certain book written by a well-known theologian and philosopher. Mr. Vassie's remarks were characterized by general fervor rather than by particular analysis. His companion in this dialogue should have felt flattered at this rare proof of his confidence. Instead of that (inspired, let us hope, by a genuine desire to verify a reference), this person, in Mr. Vassie's absence, took up Mr. Vassie's book, and behold! in the very nick of the argument pages were still uncut. It strikes one as almost an indecent action, thus to catch a respectable middle-aged man out in such a fault on his own study table. But the person who did it was punished for unintentional prying, if it were unintentional, for she never could forget; and when Mr. Vassie talked books in her presence (it was a woman's deed) she thought of his paper-knife, which was a gigantic affair and worked hard. Mr. Vassie had taught each of his daughters to cut the leaves of a book, after a manner which he considered good; it is a fitting thing for the daughters of a student to know. Go in when one might a stout volume was

lying on the table near the master. He was sometimes so deep in study that it took several knocks to rouse him; and he would come and unlock the door with his hair dishevelled and a dazed look in his light eyes. He did not like to be disturbed. Mrs. Vassie said that students never did. She would come back and tell the girls for the hundredth time how clever their papa was, and how good it is when a generation possesses learned men content with learning for its own sake, striving after no vulgar notoriety. Mr. Vassie was not even on the council of any learned society, and his fitful correspondence was carried on with unlearned persons. These were subjects for deep regret to his wife, but she did her best to forget herself in compensating him for his share of these misfortunes.

"We ought to show, my dears," she would say to the girls, "that we do not measure worth by so false a standard. I often wonder that papa is so patient as he is when he thinks how his gifts have been overlooked. When he was only twenty-three, before we were engaged, his tutor and his coach at the University said he had unusual capacity, and might rise to any post. And if that can be said of a man of three-and-twenty—just your age, Tabitha—what ought he not to be by fifty? And you know what a brilliant degree he took! And think how he studies! Though, having an independent fortune, of course he need not. If only one of the boys would show the same love of learning!"

Mr. Vassie kept his books locked up. He said there were sceptical and unsettling works among them, unfit for servants to look into. He also locked up the many modern works that he bought; of these he had a large and heterogeneous collection; and the review that had led to each purchase was, as a rule, carefully laid or pasted into the front. Mr. Vassie was nothing



if not a stickler for recognized authority; in matters such as these he rendered to many men more than their due; and in household matters he laid his accounts for a like exaggeration.

Mrs. Vassie tried hard to keep up the idea of privilege in connection with the personal service upon the head of the family. While the children were children it had been her fond notion to reward the best marks in the school room with the carrying of papa's tea to the study, and one of the many things she lamented now the elder girls were growing up was that the habit had fallen into desuetude. She often carried it herself, as she had been used to do in the early days of her marriage. "It is not a duty I could delegate to a servant," she would say. "When the brain is irritable and overworked a gentle footfall makes all the difference."

"Dear papa works so hard with his brain that he must have his tea strong."

"Your papa has so powerful a brain that we who have only hands are honoured in ministering to him."

It was hard for Mr. Vassie to disappoint such pertinacity. And with a large family in these democratic times, it is both rare and comforting to feel that by a diligence not our own, a halo that we dare not lay claim to is made to shine round our head. And in any days it must warm the heart to know that the faith of the wife of one's bosom is still as firm as in the days when we ourselves thought that grand performances of one sort or another were well within our accomplishment. The intrinsic merit of no man increases by sitting down to do nothing on a small income. But it does not conclude this matter to talk about false pretenses: is there nothing owed to the wife? Wives of men with limited incomes and large families and a

position to keep up, have not too easy a time of it. For a fancied idea of rectitude, which does no good to any one, dare one rob them of their one bit of romance?

As for Mrs. Vassie, she held that it was her duty to invent fancy employment for her family, chiefly, I have thought, in order that she might uninterruptedly do herself everything that was necessarily done. Men, as well as children, are doubtless happier employed. If, in earlier days, Mr. Vassie found it irksome to be shut up alone day by day to engage in study for which he felt a chastened desire, he had got by this time to follow the habit as a matter of course. It passed the mornings, and gave him some feeling of business in the afternoons, where all his outdoor errands came consequently to be heaped.

I never heard Mr. Vassie argue this; but it is the obvious line to take when I constitute myself his special pleader. And what is a writer of fiction if not a special pleader for each and all of her characters, with advantage duly given to the favourite heroine?

## CHAPTER II

### THE MOTHER OF THE CHILDREN.

Mrs. Vassie had married at twenty, and had her first baby before she came of age; since when she had always possessed a nursery full of children and a husband and four or five servants to keep happy and busy. When she had time to think about herself, or even to think according to her own prompting, there was the baby presently coming, or the baby just come; or the old days that seemed already so far away, when Mr. Vassie had not been content unless she lived by his side. That experience had not lasted long, but our memories are bad time-keepers, and it occupied a great space. She wondered occasionally whether anything she could have done would have prolonged it; or whether all mothers of ten children are unable to keep pace with their husband's flights of learning. She hoped she might find a little more spare time, before she and her husband both grew quite old, in the future, when the babies would be big, and the girls would be grown up, and when the children would have got past measles, and lessons, and would no longer grow every month or two out of frocks that are still in good condition. But she did not often indulge in such unpractical regrets or visions. She had enough to do to cope with the facts of to-day. A fixed income and a growing family call for much careful adaptation. She had spent so many sighs and tears over her account-books that she had few left for the pages of the past; and she had trembled so often before engaging in an

actual struggle for authority with an autocratic cook, that she ceased to tremble before imaginary trials of the future.

She had never been able to travel or to pay visits; there were always the babies or the children, and Mrs. Vassie held views about leaving them to servants. She had not made new friends, nor kept the old ones close; to do that means leisure for brain and body, and Mr. Vassie did not find much pleasure in the society of his wife's friends. Yet not to be a lady's man may reckon as positive or negative virtue. She had not been able to read; there was the price of new books to be considered; and in her work-basket, standing in a conspicuous place near the window, was always a heap of miscellaneous needlework, silently accusing her of waste of time when she sat down for half-an-hour to read. And an accusing conscience makes a bad third for a book and a reader. It will not lie still. It absolutely forbids concentration of thought on the printed page. In its company only the lightest literature can be read, and that not very attentively. And the greatest admirer of book-learning (among whom I do not pretend to class myself) cannot say that this lightest literature is of great service to the mother of a long family, or that it deserves any more consideration than may be accorded to another idle pastime. It was a case of conscience. Mr. Vassie usually said his say upon household finance before he paid the half-yearly bills. His wife humbly received his rebukes and counsel. Perhaps some will think she was a poor-spirited creature so to do, seeing that, in the opinion of outsiders qualified to judge, Mr. Vassie's weakest spot was on the side of household finance presided over by male genius; I see her folly, but accord to it some respect and admiration, and I would not for worlds

grudge her the comfort of believing that the father of those many children was a man of exceptional attainments. But, though she often had a sore heart after one of those half-yearly conversations, she had not an evil conscience, when she knew that she had spent all her spare moments in needlework, and that she had kept the children tidy. It was the hope of a good conscience that encouraged her to persevere. And there are but two half-years in a year, and few years go to the making of a big girl, who suddenly, in the midst of nursery and dressmaking cares, demands advice on a subject that her mother has never had the time or the opportunity to face. Mrs. Vassie had married at twenty. Before Tabitha was twenty-three a quarter of a century had passed. How shall the best of us begin all over again after a quarter of a century? And forty-five is not the time to acquire new knowledge, but to do on the strength of the old.

But Mrs. Vassie was not wanting in energy of purpose. She borrowed some books, and read them with a marker carefully placed, and with such frequent interruptions that the ideas in the books were not very easy to follow, when there were ideas. And when followed, the ideas did not fit comfortably with those left over from Mrs. Vassie's girlhood. These had had a good many years in which to root themselves, and much unoccupied space in which to grow. What wonder if they had left no room for new things? I do not know what books Mrs. Vassie happened upon, but she was out of the way of literary knowledge, and probably the collection was mixed. And it is easy to believe that there were things said about religion, and about women, and about society, and even about health, that would not have been thought suitable to say when Mrs. Vassie was young. Of course that for us proves



nothing as to their moral or intellectual worth, but for her it meant everything. It was perplexing. It was still more perplexing to find that Tabitha and even Bella seized the books as soon as she laid them down. Mary was a very good girl, and did not care for reading. She consulted her husband, who thought that Tabitha and Bella would be better employed in minding the household or in mending stockings than in entering upon such disquisitions. He took the opportunity of saying as much at table.

"I liked it," said Tabitha, holding up her head. "And even if it were stupid I like to know what people are saying. Are you obliged to agree with everything and everybody?"

"And even the family socks and stockings do not take up all the time of us three, thank goodness," said Bella, flippantly, with small appreciation of the semi-sacredness of papa's garments. "We want something else to amuse us."

"The proper place of a girl is in a comfortable home, attending to her household duties; and those who know what's good for them never wish for anything else. I should be grieved, grieved indeed, if any of my daughters were to fill their heads with the foolish notions that are abroad now among a small section of the community, about the equality of men and women. Men will never take any notice of a girl who pretends to such false equality."

"Men will never take any notice of anybody about here," said Bella, with a sigh and a little sneer, "for there are no men at all for miles around."

"There's old Mr. Mooney at the vicarage, and young Sawday, the land-agent and auctioneer," said Tabitha, pretending to take an impartial view of the situation, as she spread her bread with jam.

"Sh! sh! Tabitha, my dear!" said Mrs. Vassie, glancing apologetically at her husband. "Bella, dear! Before the children, too! What can you be thinking of?"

"If these are the ideas that fill the minds of your girls, my dear, about the sacred duties of home, I think the less we have of modern literature in the house the better," said Mr. Vassie. And he looked severely across the table at his wife. Like many another man, he held his wife responsible for the girls and all their doings. He scarcely recognized that he had any share in that part of the family. "Your daughters, my dear," he would say, "your daughters do not seem to attract much notice. Your daughter Tabitha is developing a turn for sharp answers; I hope you will correct it in her. Your daughter Bella is rather too short. Your daughter Mary doesn't hold herself up."

He was very short himself and stooped a bit, but there was no one in the world who dared to remind him of that. Truly we lead ourselves into sore temptation when we cause our nearest and dearest to fear our wrath!

"I shall certainly stop the subscription to the library at once," said Mrs. Vassie. "The girls cannot have read all the good books that we have already in the house, and if they have they will bear reading over again." It was a personal disappointment to her, for she had looked forward to reading; and she had no fear of books doing her harm, for she knew that no book that is printed could alter her views on important matters. But a mother must first of all be unselfish. The girls' advantage is paramount. And it was already evident that young persons may learn from books; may pick up from them opinions different from

those in which they have been brought up, and therefore dangerous opinions.

I think there can be no question that Mrs. Vassie, from her own point of view, was entirely in the right. If you intend to keep girls at home and happy in a small space and with nothing to do, you must shut out new ideas.

There is no social distintegrator save a new and living idea, and even twenty years ago there were abroad in the world many living ideas that cannot live or let live beside idleness and stagnant thought. And once allow that you are the depositary of final truth in matters social or divine, you owe it to your children to keep them at all costs and hazards from deserting your opinions. Mrs. Vassie had no doubt or hesitation in condemning opinions about women, and religion, and books (she was not greatly interested in topics outside these) which differed from the opinions in which she had been brought up. She told me one day in so many words when we were arguing on some small thing, that her mother had taught her to think thus and thus, and that though she was now a gray-haired old woman, it would to her have savored of filial impiety to depart from that faith. She asked no more from her own girls than she had ungrudgingly given to her own mother. Nevertheless to keep out new ideas and to prevent the growth of opinion is no easy task. It can scarcely be accomplished save by a little of what passes for persecution in these tender days. And yet many persons who shrink from persecution, who will condemn Mrs. Vassie for trying to starve the new ideas out of Tabitha's brain, hold themselves to be entirely right, and all the rest of the world, Mrs. Vassie included, to be entirely wrong. If final truth is reached by the adults of your own generation, or can be enveloped in the single conception



of any one person, then persecution ought logically to follow, slight or terrible according to the nature of the persecutor. Theoretically, it ought to go all lengths; but though the spirit is willing the flesh is weak, and the victim is generally left to convert by pity those outsiders who can never be touched by argument. However, even partial persecution has its advantages to the party in power, for a very little suffices to call back to orthodoxy the half-hearted; and the public, counting heads on a division, and the mothers, loving for love's sake, do not stay to weigh intellects or to balance motives.

The situation is a very common one. Here was the mother, her strength half worn, her adult energies taken up with household and nursery cares, called upon to direct the career of women in the prime of life, women with at least as good an education as her own, women whose whole energies, nervous and physical, were untapped. She had been occupied all the best years of her life in bearing children and in tiding them over the first trials of existence; and she had done her task well, for not one of the ten was born crippled or grew up sickly. For eight years of her life she had been more or less of an invalid, suffering, it is true, for the holiest of all causes, but still suffering, and lifted out of the bustle of life. There have been in all ages and countries martyr-prisoners, men and women, who, for the world's progress, have been shut up from the wagging of the world, and who have emerged old and grey-headed, with yet a few years to look about them before this present book of lessons shall be closed in death. Many a time they have stood at the gates of death, waiting to see whether these would roll back to let them in. Many a long month and year have they spent

in lonely, grave anticipation of the future. They have read the mysteries of love and life; of death and pain. They have tasted all that the world holds of most beautiful, and some of what is most bitter. Courage is theirs, and large power of patient endurance. Life for them may have been transmuted into one great sacramental offering; and whether or not, they have gained of spiritual discernment all that they can hold, be it much or little. But men and women do not come out of a lifelong imprisonment to lead the young in battle. Still less do they, from their fastness, seek to direct the details of the onward march. What knowledge have they of detail—of the progress of the campaign, of the movements of the enemy, of the numbers on their own side or opposed to them? They do not even understand the nature, nor are they familiar with the handling of the arms of precision invented since they were taken out of the world's strife. Under such commanders failure would be certain. But, just because they were taken away from the world's strife, they may have a clearer view of eternal right. For them it need not be obscured by the smoke of to-day's battle. By them it should not be confused with temporary fitness. And inspired by them the army marches to victory under leaders of grosser mould, and less rare knowledge. To every man his work. It is to the men and women who have bought their wisdom so very dear that we turn when we hunger for inspiration.

And this very obvious parable explains, maybe, something of what I have always felt about Mrs. Vassie, and what I hold to be her mistaken dealings with her daughters. She seemed to me to neglect her nobler tasks because she could not make up her mind to relinquish the lesser. Love and self-sacrifice and

industry and patience, these were things she knew about and lived her life by. What in the world is there that any one of us can teach that is better worth teaching? But in teaching one must stick to the subjects one knows if one is to do any good at it; and when Mrs. Vassie began to talk about the ways of the world, I am the first to allow that she made herself ridiculous. For the world and its ways have changed since Mrs. Vassie was young, and it is changing day by day. To keep abreast of it means constant and deliberately directed effort. The problems that are astir tax the wisdom of the sage and the enthusiasm of the boy. And each problem touches at a different angle the life of each child. And the lesson of our times is not to be learned by sitting at home sewing clothes in strange devices; nor by reading story-books restful precisely because they leave all those problems on one side; nor by persistently keeping ourselves unchanged though all the world is changing.

## CHAPTER III

### THE GIRLS

It was considered an advantage by the family generally that the girls were small, narrow-backed, and delicate-featured; it gave them a very refined appearance. The back is fitted to bear the burden, or to bear none, and it would upset all our notions of fitness if the average girl did not adapt herself to the space of the earth allotted. There was little space, and they were little girls. They were like crowded trees, pleasant enough to look upon as they all lived close together, though shabby and ill-furnished at the bottom, near the ground. But Tabitha was twenty-three, and so far as I know, few or none had, even in imagination, picked out one of the girls and tried to see what she would look like if she stood alone.

The ten having grown to fit the crowded home, number eleven came. This was Hilda, the cousin, only child of Mr. Vassie's only brother. The girls, crowded already, had to press themselves closer. Tabitha must tidy the attic, which had been sacred to lumber and to dreaming since life began, and must occupy it as a bedroom in company with Hilda, who was a stranger, with other people's ways, and who wanted to make believe she was one of the elder ones, though she was not justified by her years. Think what a stranger means to a knot of girls who have never had any one but one another to fit, and with whom it is an article of faith to believe that home ways are *the* ways, and all the rest varieties! Think what it means to

have no corner where you can retire alone when you are growing unequally, no place on earth where you can privately hide or recover a ruffled temper! The trial took on enormous dimensions. Tabitha said she knew she should hate the cousin, and she could not see why Mary or Bella should not be bothered with her; the fact of their being a year or so older had nothing to do with it. They all began to talk on this theme at once.

"I wonder at you girls," said Mrs. Vassie, sinking into the school-room arm-chair, and panting. "I wonder at you when you know I am not equal to it, and when the baby's asleep. No; I do not want to hear anything about your dispute. You should learn to be quiet; it is not at all lady-like to talk so loud; and you should try which can give way the most. Girls who strive are never liked. And it makes the house so uncomfortable."

"I only want what is just," said Tabitha. "Let me explain!"

"If you want to do your duty, Tabitha, you will do as you are told, and make no more words about it. It is always your voice that I hear. You are always asserting yourself. Think how happy we might be if you all gave way to one another."

"It's all very well for the others," said Tabitha; "but they are not going to be shut up for henceforward and evermore with a girl that I shall probably detest. And it doesn't seem to me to be fair."

"I don't like to hear you talk about what is fair, Tabitha. Your father and I have had all the trouble and expense of you, and if you come to fairness, the least you can do in return is to be obedient and to try to please us. I am sure it is not at all easy to find food and clothes for so many; and if your cousin Hilda had



not a little money of her own, I don't know how we should manage. Papa was talking to me only last night, and saying that we must be very careful. It's a great anxiety to him, and to me. I wish you girls would remember that, and not increase our anxiety."

"I'd be glad enough to earn some money if I knew how," said Tabitha.

"I am thankful to say we are not reduced so far," said Mrs. Vassie. "You have a great deal to be thankful for in that."

"I don't know what you'd earn money at," said Mary. "You don't like teaching; you leave that to me."

"I should hate it," said Bella, putting down the stocking she was mending. "It's getting dusk; I'm going to feed the chickens and shut them up. Who's coming to help?" She went off accompanied by Mary to fulfil an important mission.

"Take one of the younger ones with you," called Mrs. Vassie. "The run will do them good."

Tabitha took a book to the window and sat staring out at the sky.

"Tabitha, my love," said Mrs. Vassie, in an unsteady voice, for Tabitha was the one of the girls whom she understood the least, and was most afraid of; "Tabitha, I'm not quite pleased with you. Why did not you go and help your sisters?"

"One's enough to shut up a few fowls," said Tabitha. "When they're out I do it alone."

"You should try to take a part in what's going on. And even if you stay behind, I like to see a smiling face. You have got into a habit of frowning till your forehead is quite wrinkled; it is most unbecoming. You can't expect to be admired or liked if you do not cultivate a smiling and cheerful face. There are enough sad things in the world without adding to

them. And you've so much to be thankful for. Your father has spoken to me several times about it; he says that a nice, contented, comely face is the first thing gentlemen look for, much before intelligence or even real beauty."

Tabitha bit her lip, severely silent.

"And it isn't a good habit not to answer when you're spoken to. You will never find anybody so fond of you as your poor old mother, and when she is gone, you will perhaps miss her. Why don't you try to be more like the others, more yielding and cheerful? Think of dear Mary now! Promise me, Tabitha, that you will try!"

Still an unbroken silence on Tabitha's part.

"I wish you would speak, Tabitha; this is obstinacy."

Tabitha unfastened her lips, and a torrent of words flowed. "I wasn't made like the others, mamma; and I don't know that I want to be like them. Mary's good, but she's not me. And as to giving way, it would often be comfortable, and far less trouble. But it isn't always right. Look at the people in history, and the martyrs, and all the rest of them! If they'd yielded, the Spanish Armada would have come, and the Pope and a lot more. You say 'give way.' But they were burnt sooner than do it. And everybody says they were right."

"The holy martyrs died for a good cause. And as for the other people in history, I dare say you don't mean it, Tabitha, but you must have fostered a habit of conceit before you could have compared yourself even in thought with them. And your duty in obeying is so very clear. You have much to be thankful for that you do not live in those times. What I complain of is that you do not do as your father and I bid."

"Yes; you, of course," said Tabitha, in sincere



agreement with the family faith. "But other people's mothers and fathers are not always right. There's Grace Tibson's mother cried for a whole day because she would be confirmed and wouldn't be a dissenter any more. And her grandmother was so angry she wouldn't give her any Christmas present."

"I never did think Grace Tibson a very suitable acquaintance for you, though you meet her at the vicarage. It's not fitting for girls to discuss such matters. How thankful we ought to be that we've no difficulty of that kind to contend with! Through the providence of the Almighty, you have been born in the Church, so different to poor Grace Tibson's case. But that has nothing to do with you when you do not yield readily. Your father and I never ask you to do anything but what is right in itself."

"Girls! Girls! I want a letter taken to the corn-merchant. Who is ready to go?" Mr. Vassie called up the stairs.

"Can't it go by the post, just for once?" said Tabitha. "I'm busy reading, and if I don't finish my half-hour I shall have to pay a fine, a whole sixpence, and I've only two or three left."

"What did you say? Only Tabitha there?"

"Tabitha will go, papa," said Mrs. Vassie, eagerly. "She is glad to run any errand for you. And it is as well to save a penny when one can, so many as there are of them. We must all be economical. Tabitha will have on her hat in a minute. Put the letter on the table, papa dear, and I will see that it goes." Then she added *sotto voce* to Tabitha, who lingered: "Don't loiter! This is what I complain of. Your papa has so much expense and anxiety with you all, and yet you don't run at once to take the letter. You should be proud and glad."—"Tabby is just going, papa. She'll

like a nice walk this evening. Walks are so good for young people. The three other girls are shutting up the hens. I am glad they've started keeping fowls. It's such a nice occupation for them all."

"I don't think there's much profit in them; the corn bill's enormous."

"I don't think they can lose much, dear. They only have eight. And girls must have something to do. I can't bear to see them sit idle."

"No; certainly not. But there must be plenty to do about the house that wouldn't run up fresh bills. There's a bill come in from Wetyear this morning; and I had to speak to you yesterday about Clothman's account. We can't spend all ways."

"No; certainly not. But I'm sure no one can be more economical in a house than I am. And we can't do without the three servants. And I try all I can to keep down the bills."

"Why can't one of the girls help in the house, or mind the baby while Mary Ann does it? They've left school, and what else is there for them? There won't be much for them when we're gone if we go on at this rate."

"If it were known that we could not afford to keep a nursemaid, or that they did housework, it might spoil their chances. Girls in our position can't do it, as society is at present constituted. That's what I'm afraid of, dear. And of course we ought to make every effort sooner than that. And they'll all have a little when the time comes."

"It will be a little, if things go on at their present rate. And now poor Bob has left me his girl to look after. It's almost too much for a man."

"Luckily, Hilda has her own little income. And when I'm inclined to be despondent I remember that

if we do our best, God provides for the children. I trust in Him. Some of the girls are sure to marry. I feel sure they will. Girls do. And they're such good girls, they deserve it."

"Mary's not so young as she was, if she means to marry. And even Tabitha is twenty-three. You were married at that age."

"There was an article in the paper the other day saying that girls don't marry so young now-a-days. I think it is a pity. To be married, or at any rate engaged early, is a great blessing for a girl, and a boy too. It keeps him straight, and gives her something to think about. It's difficult to find employment for so many at home. That's why I'm so glad of these fowls, even if they do cost a little money, dear. Most amusements cost more than a little corn."

"Why wasn't Tabitha out with the others?"

"Tabitha does not care for animals. She never did as a child. She likes a book, or to practise the piano."

"Tabitha ought to marry. She's a good-looking girl. My old friend Curling was saying the other day that he considered her very good-looking—very good-looking indeed."

"Ah! Is she now? I shouldn't have known it. I should have thought she might be a little too determined for gentlemen's taste. Bella, now, is more what I should have expected them to admire. And then I feel I understand Bella so much better; she is more like what I was as a girl. You always say so, Edward."

"Well! Marrying and all that sort of thing belongs to you women. You understand it; I feel I don't."

The girls came rushing in, with big aprons on, and stopped short in the doorway, seeing their sanctum invaded by their father. There was something they were all in a hurry to say about a chicken that had torn

one toe, but they took it always for granted that papa's interests lay apart from those of women and children.

"What a draught you are making, girls."

"You had better go and meet Tabitha. It is getting dark and I don't like her to be out alone. Put on your hats quickly. Shut the door!"—"It's a great thing to keep girls employed. They will be quite happy now till tea. I thought of that when I started Tabitha out alone."

"Four is a great many. It falls rather hard on a man who marries early himself if none of his girls marry. It is taken out of him at both ends, and the biggest income won't stand it."

"And nothing would induce me to hawk my girls about, or let it be seen that I want them to marry. The bare idea is horrible. Still, it would be a great comfort to think that some of them were provided for, and if these things are going to be they happen quite suddenly. There was a friend staying at the Hall last week; I saw him on Sunday in church, a very nice-looking man, who followed the service most devoutly. The girls say he is a cousin, a Mr. de Voise. It sounds as if it might be a good name. The girls are going there to tea on Thursday. I expect Mr. de Voise will be there."

"Well! They are your daughters. All I say is I won't have my house infested by a lot of young fellows, drinking my wine and smoking about the place. The girls may go out as much as you please."

"Yes, dear. And it's cheaper to give them a few new dresses, so that they may look like other girls. One can't expect them to make any favorable impression if they are too shabby. I don't think it does any good to dress them expensively; it gives the idea that they are brought up extravagantly, and that my girls are not.

But becomingly. I do it as cheaply as I can. But I know Clothman's bill was higher than usual this quarter. The girls grow older every day, and things that do for children don't do for girls of four or five and twenty."

Mr. Vassie groaned, but he said nothing. He had the habit of inarticulate replies; after them no one could tax him with having said anything definite. Then he rose and went away to shut himself up in his room till dinner-time.

Mary and Bella did not hurry in their preparations for meeting Tabitha on the high-road. They sat each one on the end of a small bed, slowly divesting herself of an apron. Then they both took off the hats they had worn to feed the fowls in, and leisurely took hats one degree better from the cupboard. It was not dusk yet, and there was plenty of time both to do and to dawdle. They were well aware that their mother had sent them on this errand in order to get them out of the way; they did not imagine that there was any good in going to meet Tabitha; it was only that while they went some time would pass. And they felt no resentment towards their mother, nor shame for themselves; in their experience it was the natural and fitting thing to put time behind them rather than to use it. They were quite content with nothing to do from week's end to week's end. That was what made them, Mary especially, such pleasant girls to live with in close quarters, where half the work of one able-bodied woman had to be divided among three. To be sure sometimes Bella wished that there were a few more parties in the summer and at Christmas-time, though she had been told very often, and indeed believed very properly, that these were worldly longings, desires of the flesh. Tabitha was the one who would not be content. But then, as the girls said, Tabitha was



Tabitha. Poor Tabitha! Tabitha was clever. On the whole it is much more comfortable not to be clever. You enjoy things more, and don't have half the bother, and it is much easier to be good. There were times when the girls looked upon cleverness as a congenial defect, greatly hindering in a woman's sphere.

"We needn't go far," said Bella. "Tabby won't care. Don't you think my hat would look better if I put the bow on the other side?"

"We must meet her; but just outside the gate will do quite well. There's no need to start yet. I think they are wearing bows more in the front just now. That girl in the Hall pew had an enormous one, and it was tipped straight over her eyes."

"I'll alter it to-morrow, when I've time," said Bella. "I want new trimming, but that I know I shan't get."

"You'd better get Tabby to do it. She's the best at making bows, and she likes to be asked."

"So she does. I'll ask her to-night when we see her. I shall have the hat on. If she's not cross; she is sometimes; she hates going errands. She will say it isn't worth walking all that way for a penny; it wears shoe-leather. But we don't buy our own shoes. As if it mattered. And we've nothing else to do."

"Poor Tabby's always wanting things to do. I can't see what's the pleasure of doing things just for the sake of doing them. She declares she wishes we were poor, so that she might have to go out and earn her living. I'd rather she than I."

"Poor old Tabby. She'll be nearly to the gate by now. And we must be able to say we've met her if mamma asks us at dinner. Come along!"

Tabitha was nowhere near the gate. She was, as her sisters said, cross. She had put a book in her pocket, and meant to do some reading as she walked.



But the whole of her mind was taken up with thinking on her lost sixpence, a pitiful sum for a woman of three-and-twenty to fret over in the midst of luxury, but then the Vassie girls' sixpences were very few and far between, and she had been saving up for some time past to buy a book on English composition, also some large sheets of writing-paper, on which to practise the same. And writing-paper is an expensive material so long as the purchaser is at that stage of literary attainment when it seems necessary to buy the smoothest lined blue foolscap whereon to make unmarketable scrawls in a large, bold hand. As for literary ambition, she was at that stage when a stray half-crown would have seemed (and indeed would have been) a handsome reward for work that cost her weeks of toil. She wrote, as she lived, in a kind of double existence, what she felt and thought being at sometimes uppermost, and what she had been told she ought to feel and think taking at other times the lead. Her foolscap paper and pen served to divert her energy; the impossibility of explaining her notions in written words exhausting what might otherwise have exploded to the grievous harm of the quiet home. The things that she wrote out of the fulness of her heart she either burned ashamedly, or hid at the bottom of the one small box to which she held a tiny, very ordinary key. She would not for worlds that any one had seen these efforts. Looking at the few that remained long years after, one could judge that, crude though they were, they contained the germ of a possibly strong writer. But the manuscripts that she forwarded to certain most unwisely selected editors were transcripts, not of what she felt, but of what she was taught, and honestly believed she should feel and could not. The actual feelings of Mary and Bella were set down there more

or less accurately, with the daily teaching of Mrs. Vassie; the whole served up, as was inevitable, without conviction, in a setting of which the design was copied from some unexceptionably feeble story-book, that Tabitha had read and re-read, for want of something better to do, a dozen times since she left school. She was thinking, as she walked along, how this unwelcome cousin Hilda had already robbed her of the only solitary place where she could write. And she had nearly come to the end of her paper, and without the lost sixpence could not soon buy any more. Half-way to the little market town she was overtaken by the postman, who would have carried her letter had she stuck a penny stamp on it. There was no answer to bring back, and no one could be the wiser. But she never even contemplated so flagrant an act of disobedience, and she plodded on, nursing her sense of injury. Then she overtook a woman who limped, making her way painfully to a large red brick house.

"Come in!" she said. "Are you coming to see us? Have you a message? Where are the others? Where's dear Bella? Why is she not with you? She's my favourite, you know, my favourite of you all. Come in, and tell me all about it. I've been to take the dear dogs for a trot, so we carried some soup to a woman down your way; but not so far. And now I've met you. The others will be in. And how is your mother? And Mr. Vassie? He is always studying, isn't he? We don't often see him out this way. What was it you came to tell us?"

"I wasn't coming, Miss Ide," said Tabitha. "I am carrying a letter to Wetyear at Ransham."

"Our man's going. Fancy walking all that way! But you are all so energetic that I suppose you like it. Let the man carry the letter, and come in with me

instead. You can tell me the news of the parish. Have you any? Or are you too good to gossip? When I come to my mother's age I'll give it up; but this place is so dull, and one must have something. I will show you my chickens; you keep chickens too, don't you? Are they laying yet? I had a row with Poltremans of Ransham, you know; he wanted only to allow me sixpence a dozen for my eggs, but I wouldn't hear of it; and we the oldest inhabitants, and helped his grandfather to set up. What next will these shopkeepers come to, I wonder? They've no respect for their betters. I feed the fowls every morning myself. I keep an old dress on purpose. It's quite hard work, but I make them very clean; it's the only way. Sixpence a dozen, I dare say, after all that!"

Tabitha hesitated. She did not like the Miss Ides, nor did they like her. But for want of company, many of us welcome trumpery. And this woman of twenty-three so seldom had an opportunity of either accepting or refusing anything on her sole responsibility that even Miss Ide's invitation looked almost like an adventure. They went round by the stable-yard, where an elderly groom was saddling a lean horse, and then she went into the house with Miss Ide.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE THINGS THAT SHALL BE

There were three Miss Ides, Sissy, Minna, and Poppy, each one older than the other, as is, indeed, the manner of sisters. There was an old mother, a widow, and between Minna and Poppy a widowed sister, or, so some said, a grass widow. Whispers told of another sister away somewhere in the world. The family had lived at the Priory since any time you like. They dwelt much on the age of the family, though they carefully concealed that of any individual in it. And it is no part of my present scheme to discuss the pretty question whether it was altogether to the credit of the Ides that they had had once upon a time a long start in life's race; and had lost it, step by step, until now these five women had nothing left but a bare house falling into decay, a meagre income, poor health, and a long stretch of the saddest memories. The youngest daughter was wrapped in a shawl, stooping near the fire. But the two widows occupied the arm-chairs on either side of the hearth, by right of precedence. The matrimonial efforts of both had ended in disaster; still, to be married anyhow is something for a woman. The sisters all felt that, though they rebelled against the logical consequences of it, as exemplified in the occupancy of their fireside. They none of them liked Tabitha so well as her sisters, but any company was welcome.

"How nice of you to walk all this way to see us! Come and sit down. And tell us all the news. Is there

any news? How is Mr. Vassie? Is he always reading books? He never comes this way. Why does he never come to see us?"

"We like to see a gentleman sometimes," said the younger widow, whose condition made this remark possible to her. "There are so few about here."

"We like to see you all," said the three, disclaiming boldness of sentiment; and Poppy put the shawl back from her head and giggled faintly. Poor thing! Tabitha forgot that she was almost always in pain, and it required some fortitude to do even that.

"Your housemaid cut her finger the day Bella was here last, and I saw Dr. Wilson driving fast in your direction that same evening. I made up my mind he was going to her."

"No," said Tabitha. "She's all right."

"People do die of a cut finger sometimes," said Mrs. Ide, slowly. "I knew a woman who had been ailing all her life, but nothing seemed to kill her till she cut the top off her finger, the third one, the third finger of the left hand; she was cutting a candle-end and the knife slipped; I remember that well, because there was a difficulty in removing the engagement ring; a lesson to her, I hope; most unbecoming in a young woman of her position to have a ring before she was married; and she had to bear a good deal of pain in consequence. It was a very sad thing. And she was engaged to be married to a very respectable young man; young man he was then; he's been dead and gone these many years."

"You would scarcely notice, but I have been walking almost lame," said Miss Ide.

"At your time of life you must expect to have something," said Minna gruffly. "Poor Mr. Hooper can't make you sixteen again."



"When I die of old age you must all begin to shake in your shoes," retorted Sissy.

"I'm over seventy, my dear. I'm not ashamed of my age. And I married young; I was only nineteen," said the old lady; "married on the twentieth of June, and my birthday was on the tenth. Girls married young then."

"Our brother's the eldest, and there were some of them died young," explained Miss Ide, discounting the effect of a probable sum in arithmetic done by Tabitha.

"And I'm the baby of all the family," said Poppy. "It makes a lot of difference, you know."

"Yes; to be sure," said Tabitha.

"One of you girls ought to get married," said Miss Ide in a sprightly tone. "You really ought. It would be such a nice excitement for the neighbours. Why don't you begin? Now I should have thought your Bella would have taken some one's fancy. She's so very nice. We were saying so the other day, weren't we?"

"Bella told us she was going to stay out. She seemed very pleased about it. Perhaps she will meet some gentleman before she comes back."

"Not in the least likely," said Tabitha, shortly.

"Oh! why not? Bella is very pretty, I'm sure. But only servant girls marry, I think. There's our cook wanting to marry the groom's son, a boy we've known since he was born. Absurd! What do these people want to marry for? And at that age too? It's such a dreadful inconvenience to lose her. Thirty would be quite soon enough."

"I'm sure Tabitha doesn't care about the cook. Do you now? I want to show her my new work," said Poppy. "It's dried ferns, and leaves and things, and



you stick them on a piece of glass. So nice and inexpensive, you see. Any piece of glass will do, and the ferns you gather in the hedges. They don't cost anything; and it's something to do to gather them on fine days."

"What's it for?" said Tabitha. "Very pretty ferns, aren't they?"

"I don't know what I can use it for; but it's nice, interesting work, isn't it? And so inexpensive too. Why don't you try some, or Bella? I could show you how, or give you some ferns to begin with."

"I like to do something useful," said Tabitha. "I always fancy I don't care to begin anything unless I see its destination beforehand."

"Don't you though? But that must be difficult. It's not often that you want things you can make. Things that you want have to be bought at the shop. I crocheted this shawl, but I don't want another, and really they weave them so nicely now, and so cheap, that it's scarcely worth while. And anyhow I don't want three. I've a white one besides this."

"Why can't we have something useful to do? Something that would really matter if it were done or left undone? I like to feel that I've something to do, if it's ever such a little thing, that the world is the better for something that wouldn't be done if I left it undone. I don't like to fill up the world with things, and after a year or two they fade or the fashion changes, and then you don't like to throw them away, and they are horrid to keep. Ferns are very pretty, of course, Miss Ide, but I don't think I shall begin a piece."

The elder widow said nothing. Tabitha had spoken fast, and she did not follow the fast course of an idea. The younger widow smiled, with a curling lip, and her eyes half shut. "We all set out with grand notions.

I did myself," she said. "Wait a few years and then see."

"I don't like mending stockings, or putting braids on the bottoms of my dresses," said Poppy slowly. "It must be done, of course, and the maids generally have time to do it; or I pay a woman down the village; she is glad of the money, and doesn't charge much."

"I hate to feel that I must do anything," said Minna; "especially just at a particular time. If I feel I ought to do anything, that's the very reason why I don't want to begin. What's the good of being a lady, and not a common, poor person, if you must do stupid, useful work?"

"I think perhaps in the future, if ever we move away from here," said Sissy, "I shall take up something. At present I find my time fully occupied. There's only an hour or two between breakfast and lunch, and by the time I've ordered dinner it is too late to begin much; and then the afternoons are short, and the dogs must go for a walk; and after tea the evening's here. It would be different in another place."

"I'm sure I never forget to be thankful that we are born in a good position," said Minna. "It would be dreadful to be a common person."

"We are gentlefolks," said the younger widow, accentuating every syllable. Their men-kind had gambled, drank, cheated the butcher out of joints of meat, and the baker out of loaves of bread: obliged to earn a living they would have been fit for nothing but billiard-markers. Their women-kind were ugly, sickly, small of body and mind, ill educated. Nevertheless, "We are gentlefolks" said the widow with pride.

Tabitha said nothing. She was looking round the room, at the gay flowers on the old chintz, that had enlivened so many chequered years; at the furniture,

holding stiff backs through so many crushing misfortunes; at the silhouettes round the mantelpiece and the portraits on the opposite wall, preaching so insistently and so vainly of duty for the family's sake.

The conversation was languishing when Mr. Sawday, the land-agent, came in. Tabitha knew him by sight as well as she knew her own brothers; but he was not then on speaking terms with the ladies at Benscote Manor, and Tabitha was surprised to see him shake hands with the Ide family all round. He was not very well at ease, in spite of his condescension. He proceeded to say that he was going to London, and had the ladies any commissions?

"Mr. Sawday is good enough to manage our land," said Miss Ide, explaining.

"Mr. Abraham and his father and grandfather before him have been most useful and obliging neighbours," said Mrs. Ide, nodding her head.

"Don't mention it, I'm sure!" said Mr. Sawday; and he hastened to turn the subject. "My sister," he said, "is just about taking a new house in town. Rather a good thing, it seems to me and to mother. She's got out Hammersmith way; and as I'd business in town, we're to make a trading voyage of it, and I'm to see her settled in."

"Very proper, I'm sure," said Mrs. Ide. "I shall be interested to know that she is comfortable."

"Very proper, to be sure," said Miss Ide. "It is so necessary for young women like your sister to be brought up to earn their living. And there must be teachers, if the children are to be sent to school."

"And your sister Agnes is so very clever, Mr. Sawday. I wonder you're not all afraid of her. Passed some examinations, and really got some letters after her name, like a man, I hear," said Minna. "Do you put

them on envelopes when you write to her? Funny, isn't it, for a woman?"

"What letters are they, and how did she get them?" asked Tabitha, thinking that letters might stand written over a door out of humdrum existence in Benscote.

"I'm sure I don't know," said Mr. Sawday, twisting on his chair, uneasily doubtful whether Miss Vassie's eagerness were put on or real. "Not in my line, that sort of thing. Agnes has been a good many years at it. Pays better than land, I tell her. You don't have to think of the weather. We want rain now. That upper meadow is looking very bad, Miss Ide."

"It's time I was off," said Tabitha. "I could have walked to Ransham and back in less time, and they will be wondering what has become of me."

"Must you go?" they all cried. Each one had still something to say that could not be said again to her sisters.

These Miss Ides were to Tabitha as a lighthouse, warning her off the shoals and rocks, whereon if she allowed herself to drift she would be wrecked. There was just likeness enough to be alarming. There were three of them; there were three Miss Vassies; the widowed sister, standing a step outside the trio, might parallel Hilda. They had "little enough" to live upon. It was precisely this vague phrase that Mrs. Vassie repeated to her daughters in minatory moments. They had lived all together since they were girls, inventing pastimes of a doubtfully amusing sort; and time had passed, more than they cared to remember. They had let the years slip by with their opportunities, making no unseemly wailings, nor struggling to strike out a new path for themselves. They had, in fact, kept on doing exactly that which was held before

Tabitha and her sisters as a counsel of perfection, which Tabitha, alone of the three, found impossible of attainment. They had been patient, looking out into the world, waiting for a husband. They had been gentle; Tabitha knew that they never uttered the contradictory opinions for which she was so much blamed; except the widow, and then nobody liked her. They loved one another, sticking close together; the sharp retorts and cutting allusions to age that were to be heard in the house in no way affecting their innermost feelings. And yet they had come to this! Tabitha felt that she would almost rather be wicked.

Tabitha was at cross purposes with the world when she met her sisters.

"Where have you been to, Tabby?" they cried. "We didn't set out till we thought you'd be nearly home."

"I went into the Ides'," said Tabitha. "They were sending to Ransham, and their man took the letter."

"Did you ask mamma if you might?" said Bella.

"Will papa like to have his letter carried by a man?" said Mary.

"Ask her? Certainly not," said Tabitha. "Am I not old enough to visit a neighbour without asking leave as if I were a child of two? Besides, how could I know I should meet her?"

"I should wait, and not tell mamma before to-morrow," said Mary. "It's no good having a fuss. And as for the letter, when you come to think of it, it would get there quite as soon, and the Ides' man is very trustworthy. We needn't say at all, that I see."

"I did what I think it right to do," cried Tabitha. "Why should I make a secret of it? If they like to be cross, so they must. I've done nothing wrong. And



I hate your way of manœuvering and keeping things back. Bella does it too."

"Things sound quite different according to how you put them," said Mary.

"And you must manage a little if you want to have peace, especially with a man. I do love to have things quiet and peaceable. A fuss is so horrid."

"Peace!" cried Tabitha. "It can't be the best thing in the world. I want to work first, and see things while I'm young. Why can't we have something to do? Mamma is always saying that we have no money, and that we shall have scarcely anything to live upon when we're old. Why can't we earn some? I don't care what I do; but to sit at home, and grow like those horrible Miss Ides, that's what I won't and can't."

"You wouldn't like to be a governess; you don't like teaching. You won't even take a class in Sunday School."

"Sooner than get like those Miss Ides I'd marry the first fool or knave that asked me," continued Tabitha.

"You put things so disagreeably, Tabby. I dare say he'd be very nice. But nobody at all has asked either of us yet."

"It isn't always so very nice even when you are married," said Mary. "Of course I should like to have a house of my own; but husbands are often very cross. I'm sure no husband would let you speak out, Tabby, as you do. I often hear papa talking at night, and I know mamma's dreadfully sleepy. And I can hear by the tones of his voice that he's scolding."

"I shouldn't let my husband scold me," said Bella.

"I don't suppose anybody would care to marry, if you could only have a little place to move about in, and something to do, and be able to accept your own invitations, and not have to get out of everybody's way," said Tabitha, in youthful ignorance.



"Perhaps not, but things aren't so," said Mary, who took the world as she found it.

"Why shouldn't they be?" said Tabitha. "There have been women writers, and queens, and women who did things. Why might not one be like them?"

"It isn't likely that any one of us, any one of our own family, is clever like that," said Mary. "Think! They'd have to be geniuses, or nearly that. And you're clever, Tabby, I dare say, but you're a long way from a genius."

"Anyway, genius or not, I don't mean to muddle on like the Miss Ides, and at the end to be left poor as church mice, and duller than ditchwater. What a life to lead! They don't like me, but they'd rather see me, or young Sawday, or any creature on earth, than be left to one another and their own dullness."

"I'm sure I don't know that they don't like you," said Mary. "And if they don't, it's only because you say things they don't understand and they are afraid of you; and you won't say their fancy-work is pretty. It isn't always; but I find something to say that will please them. And what can it matter?"

"But I don't want them to like me," said Tabitha. "That's where you make a mistake. Of all things in the world, I've the greatest horror of growing like any one of the four. And perhaps if people hadn't pretended to think them charming when they can't, and pretended to admire their hideous fancy-work when they don't, they might not have kept on doing it all these years, filling up the world with themselves and a lot of dusty rubbish."

"You're so odd, Tabby, when you go off like that. As if there could be anything right or wrong in doing fancy-work! If they like doing it, isn't that enough?

In matters that are not matters of right and wrong it is much better to give in and to please people."

"If you'll show me a matter that isn't a matter of right and wrong, I'll agree with you," said Tabitha, sententiously. "Isn't it wrong to waste your time and money, money especially, when you don't pay your bills? And the Ides don't. And isn't it right to lead a useful life? And can anyone pretend that it's useful to stick bits of dry leaves on glass?"

"You're so funny, Tabby, when you get arguing like that. Of course poor people who have to earn their living must do useful things, or no one would give them any work. But if you've got money enough to live upon, surely you can please yourself, and do what you like, so long as it doesn't do anybody any harm?"

"Why do you argue with Tabby, Mary? She'll go on forever if you do. Of course she doesn't believe it all; it's just for the sake of talk. What do you do that's useful yourself, Tabby? Mamma and Mary mend stockings, and you don't do more than your share of other sewing. You're always reading a book when you can get one; and that's not useful at all, though it's nice if you've got a new book that you like."

Tabitha made no ready retort. "I don't do anything useful," she said. "I'm no use to anybody. I might just as well not have been born, or have been born stupid. And I'm three-and-twenty."

The sisters were so astonished at Tabitha's unusually acquiescent frame of mind that they all passed into the house silent, wondering what would in the end become of Tabitha?

## CHAPTER V

### THE NEW-COMER

Next day Mrs. Vassie was too fully occupied in preparing for Hilda to inquire closely where Tabitha had been over-night. Mrs. Vassie, allowing no room for the exercise of her girls' individual judgment, only treated them as she treated the entire household. They were woven into her scheme of things; they were part of her plan; the servants were another part. She always said that "as long as she had health and strength and legs to stand upon" she would keep everything in her own hands. "Time enough to abdicate when you must." And "everything" included every match-box, every paper full of pins, every half-pound of butter, every invitation to chat half-an-hour or to drink a cup of tea. Things are by comparison, and these were large matters on Mrs. Vassie's mind. And she had her reward. She was for ever busy; for ever called in several directions; and it was impossible that any one in the house should comfortably move hand or foot without her goodwill. She ran hither and thither, settling each detail. She planned the arrangement of the furniture in Tabitha's and Hilda's room. She bustled in and out, lamenting that she was tired, telling Tabitha that she should get something to do, bidding her go and play tennis with Bella; tennis was good exercise, and exercise was good for girls. Tabitha was never a lover of games, and there was an unreality about the performance that annoyed her. How gladly would she have run the errands, settled the pin-

cushions, ordered the puddings, and set out the match-boxes, if only she might have done it herself, and exercised her judgment on these small matters! To do double the running would not have tired her young legs. But to accomplish such pitiful jobs under strict superintendence; to save no time of her mother's while yet she spent all her own, was a thing Tabitha's practical mind could not abide. And then at dinner Mr. Vassie observed that the girls left everything for their mother to do; and he wondered they were not ashamed, and what good was practising at the piano, or writing what never was published, while you neglected straightforward duties? What indeed? It was a thought to fill Tabitha with disgust. Nobody felt more decidedly than she did that she was wasting years that would never return.

Mr. Vassie drove the seven miles to meet Hilda; and then Tabitha's room was filled with big boxes till Tabitha could scarcely get in to wash her hands before tea. Hilda, a big, black figure, with bright, dark eyes, looked up from the box that she was unpacking. The room was strewn with clothes, and already Hilda was much better dressed than Mary and Bella and Tabitha on Sunday.

"Is this your room?"

"Yes," said Tabitha.

"I think you'll hate to be invaded like this."

"It can't be helped," said Tabitha curtly.

Hilda got up from her knees. "What can I do to make it better? I did not want to come, but I'm too young to live alone, so they say. I can't take myself off, at least not yet. I'll get a curtain and hang it up, and we can turn the beds round. The room isn't made the best of; and there are things in my box to make it more comfortable and prettier."

"Mamma thought the beds better so," said Tabitha. "And she does not like curtains much."

"No?" said Hilda, without interest. "I think I do. "Doesn't she have any herself? I suppose you have shops here where one could buy such a thing? It seems a dull sort of a place after a city. But it's good of Uncle Ned to have me when there are so many of you. My father thought so much of him. I'm glad of one thing; that I've got money enough not to be an expense as well as an inconvenience."

"I suppose you'll have your own money when you're twenty-one," said Tabitha.

"Yes; then I shall have it all. Now I have only twenty-five pounds a year to spend as I choose. I've got all my things, enough to last a long time; that's why I can buy the curtains and anything else we want in our room. We must think it over, and then you and I will go to the shop together." She turned to the box again, then suddenly stopped in her unpacking, and said impulsively, "Don't think me a nuisance more than you can help, Tabitha! I'm all alone in the world, and I've nowhere else to go to."

"I don't think you a nuisance at all," said Tabitha, her kindness triumphing over truth; "at least, not now I've seen you."

"I know it's horrid not to have a place you can call your own; I feel it, too. But as soon as ever I'm older I'm going away to earn myself a position and a home, and to do some work. I'm going to be a doctor. It won't be for long that you'll have me."

"I want to go away, too, and to be something," said Tabitha, inspired to make this rare confidence. "Only I don't know where a girl can go nor what she can be. I wish I were as old as you and had some money, and then I'd try at once."



"There are lots of things you can be," said Hilda, confidently. "And of course if we're both going in for something we must read together and learn all we can. I'm so glad it's you and not one of the others; for I know you're the clever one. Father always said so, and so did Uncle Ned when we asked him. And so I think we shall get on."

In all Tabitha's short life no one had ever alleged her cleverness as a reason for liking her. It was a new sensation and augured friendship.

"It sounds so funny to hear papa called Uncle Ned. Did your father say how clever he is? He's always reading."

Hilda hesitated. "I like Uncle Ned. He's so amusing to talk to. We always get on," she said. "Father didn't say exactly that. He said sometimes he might have done a great deal if he had not come in for this place."

"Ah!" said Tabitha. "Might have done. I wonder what! Your father had to work, of course, being younger son. Did you like going about with him, and having no home of your own?"

"Like it!" echoed Hilda. "Shall I ever like anything again? But it's something to have been. Sticking at home, always in the same little place, what do you know? That's what's been such a pity for Uncle Ned; father always said so. You can't help thinking your own little ways are the only ways; and that's such a fatal habit of mind." She spoke with a curious intonation, quoting from words remembered.

"Yes?" said Tabitha.

"Father said it was a pitiful life to live on money somebody else had earned, and to do nothing but make yourself as comfortable as you could from the moment you get up till the time you go to bed. I



should have been something even if he'd lived. He always told me he should leave me just enough to live upon, but only just enough; and I must work to pay the world for the cost of keeping me alive."

"But women never work," said Tabitha; "not like that. And as for paying the world, you haven't got a public pension."

"No; of course not. What's that got to do with it? Where should it come from? But anybody can see that if you do nothing but eat or drink and wear your clothes out, it would be much better for things in general if we weren't alive, eating and drinking and wearing out clothes."

"But you pay for them with your own money," said Tabitha slowly; "or somebody else does. They're not stolen."

"And you'd have to leave your own money behind if you died. It could better be spent on some more useful person's food and stuff."

"But I didn't ask to be born," said Tabitha. "And I can't help living. Sometimes I think I would if I could. Of course I don't do any good. But is that my fault? What could I do? I'm always asking for something to do, and they won't let me. I can't call it doing anything to shut up fowls, three of us, and to get three to fetch a parcel that one could carry. It's all very well for you who've money of your own, and twenty-five pounds of your own to spend, and no mother and no father, only a guardian, which isn't the same thing at all. I can't turn any way without asking leave, and then when I have asked they don't give it. Useful! I don't do anything useful, of course. But who does, I mean of girls like us whose fathers have money?"

Tabitha's companion got up from her knees once

more. "If you knew what it means to be without father or mother you wouldn't say that. And now I've got needles and pins. And I didn't mean you or anybody in particular. I meant things and people in general. And as to be wanting to be done with life, that's the last thing! Things are a bother, but they're awfully interesting, and there are so many things in the world. But father always said you must be the cleverest of your family, and so you must be. And so I suppose you could do lots of things if you liked and they'd let you. But of course they'll let you if you keep on; you're old enough to know your own mind, and this is a free country; or so they say."

Then the bell rang and Tabitha must escort the new cousin down to tea. Mr. Vassie came in, and Hilda immediately engaged him in conversation. She told him of her father, of the last journey they had taken together, and she quoted her father's opinions about men and things with a fine air of proprietorship. When it suited her fancy, she differed from her uncle with the coolest goodwill in the world. Mr. Vassie listened and nodded his head, and did not once lose his temper through the meal. His own girls heard amazed. He was not wont so to do with them. But then they had nothing fresh to say; they had seen no foreign countries; nothing but Benscote's neighbourhood, respecting which each party to the conversation began with a settled mind. A country village such as Benscote rarely produces interesting conversationalists; and surely a father may gauge his own daughters' powers. Moreover this slip of a girl echoed familiar sayings not her own.

After tea Mrs. Vassie said to the girl, "Your uncle is a very clever man, my dear; and when you have been with us a little time you will know how much he

knows, much more than a girl can know upon any subject. It's a pity to be too ready to set up your own opinions and to rely upon your own judgment. But I don't wish to blame you; you've had no mother all your life."

"I don't know much about it, it's true," said Hilda, pleasantly. "But you can't always talk about the weather; and conversation is impossible if one keeps on saying 'Yes'; or 'To be sure, uncle;' or 'Of course you know best.' Uncle Ned likes to hear. And does he really know any more? You see you must know their languages before you know much about any people, and Uncle Ned doesn't know much French, nor anything of any other language. I remember that, because he and father were talking about it the last time father was at home."

"French, my dear," said Mrs. Vassie, meeting the inquirer with decision, "is a language that it was not the custom for boys to learn when your uncle was young; or he would, no doubt, have learned it; it is a very easy language. And Latin and Greek must be more useful for a man, though I do not pretend to know anything of either myself. There are things much more important for a woman to know, if she is to be a good woman and to do her duty in the world, and to prepare herself for a future life. An able man with good judgment and long years of experience must know more on any subject than a young girl can do; a little French does not alter that."

"We learned French and German too," said Bella, "when we were in the school-room."

"Quite so; your cousins know French, Hilda, and will use it when, if ever, they go abroad. But I should be sorry if a thing like that made them conceited about their own opinions."

"Do you read French books, Tabitha? Have you any?" asked Hilda eagerly.

"Your cousins had very good lessons of a master until the Christmas before last," said Mrs. Vassie. "But I do not approve of French literature for girls' reading, nor for young people generally. Of course boys go out in the world, and you can't always be aware of what they do read. But English books are much more suitable."

"Father used to say that a foreign language is a key, no good unless you use it to unlock something."

"From what I know, my dear, they are better locked up," said Mrs. Vassie severely.

"We've got to unpack the rest of Hilda's things," said Tabitha. "Let us go."

The two did a great deal of talking and very little work.

"What's the good of hurrying?" said Tabitha. "There's plenty of time to-morrow."

"For once Tabby is wise," said Mary, comely and smiling. "Generally she scampers through everything, and then laments she has nothing to do. Much better take more time."

"I suppose I shall always have plenty of time now," said Hilda. "And if you do things too quickly they can't be done well."

"Mary can't say I do my work worse than other people," said Tabitha hotly. "But what's the good of deceiving yourself by dawdling? And I never am deceived into believing I've done a good day's work when I haven't. What's the good of deliberately spreading out work to cover your time? No; I think it's more honourable to work while you work and then finish."

"Not when it worries papa to see you do anything

fast; and you know it does; and mamma can't bear to see you sit with your hands before you. It's quite natural; gentlemen are like that." Mary was always satisfied to attribute to sex-antagonisms any moral inequalities that she encountered.

"Not all men!" cried Hilda, jealous. "Father could be quick as lightning."

"Most men, anyway," said Mary. "Of course you can't judge by one." She was six-and-twenty, and knew that even empty years should count, weighing down opinions.



## CHAPTER VI

### BOOKS AND OTHER THINGS

To her astonishment Tabitha found, in the course of a few weeks, that there were strong arguments for as well as against Hilda's presence in her life. In the first place, Hilda had books; not only many of her own, but also a large selection of her father's, which she had been allowed to bring with her to Benscote. She had asked Mr. Vassie's permission at the time of the funeral, and he had found it simpler to accede than to refuse. Besides, he thought well of books, taken in the mass.

Mrs. Vassie thought it a pity. To begin with, she thought ill of books as books. Then there were no sufficient book-shelves, and she never encouraged girls to buy all the things they took a fancy to. And she was afraid that if Hilda spent money, her own girls would become discontented. She thought Hilda much too young to have an allowance of her own. It would have been better for her that what was suitable should be bought by her aunt, as she bought for her daughters. Of course when Hilda, who never had had a mother, lived with her father alone, she might be compelled to do the best she could by herself; but now circumstances were altered. It is well known that young girls do not always lay out their money to advantage; in this matter of book-shelves, for instance, a good many more shillings would be gone than Mrs. Vassie

could afford to spend on any whim of her own. But as to the allowance, Mrs. Vassie had been obliged to give in.

Hilda, one morning after her arrival, had boldly knocked at her uncle's study door; and as the door was quickly opened and as quickly shut, no one knew exactly what had passed between the two. But the upshot of it was that when Mrs. Vassie spoke to her husband about this unsuitable allowance, the affair was already settled.

"It was poor Bob's plan for her," said Mr. Vassie. "And I must say she spoke very sensibly and properly. She hoped that the rest of her money would pay us for the cost of her keep; she knew nothing could pay for love and kindness. Hilda's a very agreeable, well-bred girl. I hope she may be a good companion for her cousins."

"Of course it's a great advantage for her having been so much about, Edward. Our girls have not had that advantage. But they are good girls, and have not once complained to me at having to give up to their cousin a share of their home."

"I don't see that the girls are asked to give anything. And Bob's left the child enough to pay for all she has," said Mr. Vassie, hastening to defend his own flesh and blood. "Between seventy and eighty pounds a year over and above her pocket money, she says, and I think she's about right. You'd better take that and put it into the housekeeping, now you have one more to feed."

"If that were paid regularly to me," said Mrs. Vassie. "Any fixed sum is so convenient. And then you know what you have got to spend."

She honestly thought it would have been well had all Hilda's money passed through her hands; but this

was far better than nothing. She could depend on her own management to make the bills little if any the larger, and this thirty shillings a week would come in cash, as an extra. It seemed to her almost like an answer to prayer.

So Hilda and Tabitha went to Ransham and bought a second-hand book-shelf, and arranged their books on it in grand style. One shelf was given over to Tabitha, who collected her properties from all parts of the house, and was surprised to see what a fine show they made.

"Splendid!" cried Hilda. "And Uncle Ned gave them to you, most of them. Uncle Ned is a brick; I always knew it."

Perhaps, after all, it was Mr. Vassie who had caused Tabitha to be what she was. He lived much with books himself, and some sort of fitness in action was demanded from him. He gave the girls each a book every Christmas, choosing them at his bookseller's when he went to town, and giving one apiece at haphazard. It was like giving Tabitha three presents and the rest none, for she always read her own, and then borrowed her sisters', who were not careful to press for their return. Bella and Mary did not spend much time in reading. They resented the idea that they should read what did not amuse them to improve their minds; reading was pastime, not duty, to girls out of the school-room; and it suited them better to run through a pleasant story, where one was not tempted to turn the page before one came to the bottom, and where, if one did turn, there was no conscience in the matter, and no harm done. And they were safe from Mr. Vassie's inquiries: he never asked the girls for the return of any ideas that he presented to them in bound form. He never asked himself for such

a thing; and it would have been subversive of order to expect of girls' intellect a capacity that he did not find in his own. But Tabitha read and re-read, and perhaps it was from books that Tabitha learned to be what she was.

Who can tell? Perhaps, on the contrary, she was born so, and learned nowhere. The most of us are children of our own age, and not of our father's, with a germ hidden somewhere within us that could not have been born save in our own moment, in our own birth-year; a germ that grows and develops, transforming all food into the likeness of itself, absorbing food that is neither taken up nor assimilated by the men and women of the age gone by. In each one of us there should be a spark of genius; a something born in us and not in another; a something that we see or know that is not seen or known by any other soul; a something in touch with all genius in our age.

Was it so surprising that Tabitha Vassie, twenty years ago, found in books ideas incompatible with the indolent life of Benscote? Were there not new ideas in the air? Had not Carlyle written? And Ruskin? And lesser men without number? And, having taught a girl to read, can you defend her from contact with the new ideas? On the contrary, it does not occur to age and wisdom to try to do it. The new ideas are at first not put under lock and key because they are mistaken for foolishness, and it were too hard a task to lock up all foolishness; besides which, foolishness is not considered an unimproving companion, especially in girls' literature. And then, while age and wisdom slumbers, not dreaming of change, somebody finds out that the new idea, either the matter or the manner of it, is a classic, and as such improving to the young mind. Girls must have books given to them at Christ-

mas and at such times: why not the new classic? Maybe the donor glances through the book, to find nothing therein not wearisome or trite. Such things have been said a hundred times before, as any one of any age knows, and yet the course of daily life is what it is. It would have been more to the purpose, we say, to have spent the money on a book we knew and liked in the old days, on some work approved by our generation, by *the* generation. But to change it means another visit to town, and the time is short. The book may well stand. And the phrases that for us were meaningless light up for the reading girl as with fire. She says nothing. She could not say what it is that so affected her. She says nothing, knowing of old that grown-ups do not understand things. She does not analyze; she feeds; making the ideas into herself; some day she will produce them as her own, now knowing otherwise. But life is never the same again. Common affairs wear another hue. Duty is set to work fighting against duty, and in the end both come out with changed mien.

For the new idea is a ferment that can live and work only in the new minds. And the ferments that were in the air of bygone days leave unchanged the young minds, which have no sensibility to that which made our whole being swarm with eager life. The fact is that we, in our fever of excitement, exhausted all the pabulum, and time must pass before the history of ideas can repeat itself.

Yet it is not fair to blame either Mr. Vassie or Mr. Vassie's lethargy for the whole of what he would have looked upon as so undesirable a condition. He, not one whit less than his daughter, was the product of the history of his time. In no previous age could a man have lived so peacefully through middle life. Yet



his youth and early manhood had been filled with terrifying prophecies of evil. Hilda could coax from him tales of the Chartist uprising, when he, peaceful student though he was, had been sworn in special constable, and had paraded the streets of London in momentary expectation of civil war. To the girls he did not enlarge upon the feeling of flat disappointment when nothing came of all the preparation.

Even after that there was no sudden settling down to dull prose. For months he had read in his daily paper records of bloodshed and riot in all the capitals of Europe. Naturally, now that he looked back on it, he took some credit to his contemporaries, and even to himself as a voting citizen, for the peaceful outcome of those disquieting days. Can any one say that we, now-a-days, with all our pretensions, could certainly have done as well? It is the height of arrogance to condemn a people or a policy that has done its duty in its day. Mrs. Vassie thanked God that she was born in her own age and not in another; and we, fault-finding with Mrs. Vassie, share her folly, though we forget her virtue. We all are products of our age, for the reason that we could not be ourselves and products of another. If we had been born in Mr. Vassie's years, we should be of the mind of his contemporaries.

The men of Mr. Vassie's time have heard "Wolf" cried in their ears before. They were warned of whirlwind, and they have lived through a dead calm. Is it any wonder that they are not now easily uproused? Even if they believe that the law of the universe can be set aside for English gentlemen, it is not unnatural. We all judge from experience, if we are wise; and their experiences is not a misfit for that assumption. They managed their affairs quietly and not amiss by

comparison; let us be sure that we do as much before we condemn them.

Mr. Vassie's money had been gathered for him by his forebears during long troubled years; spending it in peace, he had never known the meaning of hunger, had never tasted the joy of battle. Other men might write of the motives of human action; from his life they had been absent, and he had not moved. Money had been given to him. His love had fallen into his arms at the first invitation. His religion had been that of other people and of the State, framed exactly to fit minds like his own. And given money, love and religion, who fights for more? If all other people had and did the same, what a paradise this world would be!

And Tabitha Vassie was the product of that quiet after-time, when war-scares had died away, when sacrifice sounded like an old war tune in the ears, and when prosperity and peace were the melodies in fashion. They were needed to calm the nations, bled to death by the wars of the early century; and for childhood peace is at all times better than war. Tabitha had had the better food of times of peace; already persons were beginning to talk of the pampering of children, and to compare it with their own upbringing, and with the yet harder fate of the children's grandparents. She inherited part of the nation's store of accumulated energy.

Not that Mr. Vassie perceived any considerable difference between his daughter and his sisters, or her sisters. As has been said before, he was not a lady's man, and the points of resemblance between women struck him more forcibly than the items of contrast. Woman, the abstraction, is embodied in every woman who walks the world. She is smaller than man. She is numerous; and, partly owing to

her numbers, her chief virtue is subordination. She wears skirts, caring much to have many new ones. Her ordinary conversation is about her "things." She likes housekeeping; also babies. She does not read philosophies, and only skims *The Times*. She does not need money to spend. She knows she ought to be pretty; attractive too, but moderately; since the wise man does not desire too much of her. So were women whom Mr. Vassie thought he knew in his boyhood; so will women be to the end of time. It did not exactly describe Mrs. Vassie; but she had not cared to instruct her good man more completely, finding these, for her purpose, good working hypotheses.

I refine and explain, forgetting that Tabitha was a simple, ignorant creature. She thought her father had read and understood the books he gave her, and much more thereto. She thought the notions that filled her head were the most obvious in the world, and only marvelled how her wiser neighbors reconciled them with daily existence. And she did her best to conceal her peculiarities of thought and ambition from her family, not less sincerely grieved than they were that she could not and did not feel as an ordinary girl should.

## CHAPTER VII

### A QUIET HOME LIFE

Mrs. Vassie and the girls were sitting with their needlework on a chilly afternoon, and Mary was reading aloud. The book was not one to engross the whole interest of a vigorous mind, and they all listened with one ear while they busied themselves with their own work and thoughts. It was never the fashion at Benscote Manor to do one thing at a time. Tabitha was making coarse garments for the poor. Ada, who came after the two boys, and was barely seventeen, was mending her stockings, hardly reconciled thereto by the knowledge that to sit and sew in the school-room instead of going for a walk with nurse and the younger ones meant promotion. Bella had a strip of elaborate fancy work spread out on the table. There came the end of a chapter, and Mary laid down the book. It needs an effort to keep one's mind fixed for a length of time, even on a story-book; and why make the effort if nothing constrains thereto?

"What are you going to do with it, Bella, after all?" she said.

"I'm sure I don't know. It will take me months to finish it. So I shall have time to decide. It will be very handsome, I'm sure; but I don't quite see what it's fit for."

"I always say I can't think how you can like to do things that haven't got any end or reason," said Tabitha. "I've quite made up my mind who I shall give my things to; I did before I began,"

"Plain work, like you're doing, is very dull; and then you can't do it of an evening, in the drawing-room, or when there's any one here, or when you go out. It looks so awkward. What can one do? It doesn't look well to sit idle. You must have something just to hold in your hand."

"It's quite right to sew for the poor sometimes," said Mrs. Vassie. "Yet if things go on at their present rate, the working people will be the only people who are at all well off. Things are all going down so, papa says. We have come to the end of a chapter, girls, and I have something to say to you. I really think we shall soon have much less to live upon. Ada is getting a big girl, and she may listen too. I am afraid you will have to make your Sunday frocks last a little longer. There are so many expenses. And you are all old enough to understand that putting you into mourning for your poor uncle cost a great deal of money, especially as it happened between seasons, when your summer frocks were not at all shabby, and they never come out very well if they are laid by. Clothman's bill came in a day or two ago. Altogether, I've been talking to your father, and he says we really must economize in some way. And of course the boys are a great expense, and we can't stint them; it would injure their position and prospects, and might get talked about. But of course we can easily go without; for women it doesn't matter. And your father must have his comforts."

"Then I can't go and stay at Uncle Leonard's if I'm not to have an evening frock," said Bella, pouting.

"I am sure you are glad to be unselfish, and to give up to your brothers and your father," said Mrs. Vassie. "But there are a great many of you, and expenses are heavy. Something hasn't paid so well this year, and



of course I couldn't worry papa by asking him what. He is worried already."

"It is for me to go away if there are too many," said Hilda.

"You! Dear child, no! So young as you are, and with no relations of your own. I hope you will always consider this as your home."

"And Hilda has her own money; she doesn't cost anything," said Tabitha.

"I wish we had! What a pity we can't some of us earn some. Some girls do."

"We haven't come to discuss such a thing as that. We should be thankful that we are spared any trial of that kind," said Mrs. Vassie.

"Annie Tibson told me she once got five shillings for writing a story in a magazine," said Tabitha.

"Suppose one wrote one every month for a year; that would be three pounds; it would buy a very nice frock," said Mary hopefully.

"Tabitha had better try," said Bella, threading her needle with silk, and pausing to decide where it would be amusing to set the next stitch. "There's no telling. Some one must write all the stories: and I suppose they get paid, don't they?"

"There is no reason why Tabitha should not try," said Mrs. Vassie. "I should be very proud and pleased if one of my daughters could become a celebrated authoress; if she did not neglect any of her home duties for her writing. Not that your father cannot afford to keep you while you are all at home. But as time goes on we must expect that the home will break up, as homes do; and then you'd be glad of some pursuit to fall back upon. Some of you may marry."

"I shall never marry. I am sure of that," said Tabitha. "I've never seen anybody that I would

marry if he asked me. I think I shall write a story and put a really nice man into it; the sort of man one never sees."

"As to that," said Bella, "we don't see many men. And I can't see the sense of being too particular."

"If you respect a man, my dear, I consider that's enough." Mrs. Vassie made a familiar diversion from a topic of conversation that she did not encourage. "It's getting dusk. Who's going to shut up the fowls? And I want a message taken to nurse and another to cook."

Tabitha did not raise her head from her needlework till her sisters were gone. Then she answered her mother's reproachful looks. "I'm ready enough to go, mamma, if it's something really useful that wants doing, and that nobody else can do. But I hate bustling about when I know I'm no real good."

"You mean that unless a job just strikes your fancy you won't take it up. We don't always know whether we're useful or not. It's much better to do as you're asked without stopping to think, than to get into a capacious habit of considering whether this or that is worth doing. If your father and I are pleased, what more of 'real good,' as you call it, can you want? No; Tabitha. I'm afraid that all these are idle excuses because you do not find your duty easy to do."

"If we all ran the same way we should only tumble over one another. And I stayed to-day because I want to talk to you, mamma, and it's not always easy to get you when you've time to listen. I wish I'd something of my own to do, that would do some good, that would be left undone if I did not do it."

"I'm afraid, Tabitha, that you've too good an opinion of yourself," said Mrs. Vassie, sure that there must be something seriously wrong with a girl whose father

was in a good position and who yet could express such a hope; and acting on the general principle that a warning against moral evil must be a wholesome corrective for youth. "Something of your own to do! For girls in our position it is impossible unless they are married. I suppose you would like to be married, and have a house of your own. If you would, you should learn betimes to submit and be cheerful, even when you do not feel pleased. No man would be happy with a wife who inquired into the whys and wherefores of everything he asked her to do."

Tabitha exclaimed, "I'm sure I don't want to be married, mamma!" Of the ways of husbands she had but a single experience; and for all she knew to the contrary all husbands might be built on the same pattern. "That's not it at all. But you tell us that there's no money, and that there's scarcely enough for us now we are all at home. I want to know what's going to become of us all when we're old, forty or fifty or so. Tom'll come to live here, and it isn't likely he'll want us all."

"When your father and I are dead," said Mrs. Vassie, her voice trembling with emotion; "when we are gone you will have your own money, and can go your own way, and can please yourself. But if you look forward to our death; if you have such wicked thoughts, you might keep them to yourself."

"I don't, mamma," said Tabitha, on the point of tears. "You know I don't. But why can't some of us earn something now? If I wait I shall be too old to begin. There must be things I could do. You always say I'm clever, so I shan't marry; men don't like clever wives. If I could earn enough to keep myself it would make more for the others. I should like to, really. We can't all live at home together,

and it's best to think of things in time. And it seems to me that it's right for every one to work who doesn't marry. I don't believe anybody ought to loaf away their lives and do nothing at all."

"I'm sure your father wouldn't hear of it," said Mrs. Vassie hastily. "It's quite out of the question. As for luxury, I'm sure you've many luxuries, more than a great many girls. Try and do your duty in that state of life to which you have been called. What would people say if we had a daughter out working? It would destroy all the prospects of all the others. People would say all sorts of things. You know nothing of the world, or you would not suggest anything so unsuitable."

"If you haven't money, it can't be unsuitable to earn it," said Tabitha.

"All this because I tell you you must wait a few months before you can have new frocks, Tabitha. Not one of the others has made a difficulty."

"Bella's so pretty; she's sure to marry," said Tabitha stubbornly. "Different to me."

That was just what Mrs. Vassie had often said to herself, and yet she did not like to hear it echoed by Tabitha. "You're not by any means so plain as many girls," she said, wondering how far she might extend her praise in the hope that it might relieve the situation. "Indeed, when you are pleased and cheerful you can look very nice indeed, particularly if you would take a little more pains with your clothes. And these are things we do not choose; they lie in the hand of the Almighty."

"It isn't because of the frock; it isn't indeed. Nor because I'm plain or pretty. I'd sooner have a few brains than a pretty face any day, whether I'm admired or not. I've thought of it a long time, and I really do



want to do something. I hate to hear always about what we can afford and what we can't. I'd much sooner earn sixpence of my own and spend it."

"If you want something more important to do, you should accommodate yourself to doing what you have. Everybody is expected to do easy tasks before she is set to harder ones. Learn to take the lowest place, and then you will be called to get up higher."

"I've thought about that too," said Tabitha quickly. "And if I set about it I can do things here as well as the others, perhaps better, some of them. But I'm not training myself for a hard task by doing an easy one; I'm asked to learn to be content with nothing to do. If I were to work ever so hard there'd be nothing more to go on to. You say I'm clever: I don't know; anyhow I've nothing to be clever over, and I shall kind of dwindle away."

"You had better dismiss it from your mind. I am quite sure your father will never think of it," said Mrs. Vassie.

The other girls came back. Mary took down a basket of mending, and handed the book to Bella. And Tabitha, anxious to show that she could do what was to be done, worked so vigorously that she finished her own sewing, and helped to empty Mary's basket soon after tea. Then she took her piece of fancy-work. She protested, yet submitted. I have it lying before me now. It is fairly well done, as fancy-work goes; yet I am grieved to the heart to remember that some of the best hours of such a woman's life were spent in producing objects so unlovely and so useless. The money spent on them (not to value her time at any price) might have weighed down the scale in many a crisis of Tabitha's after life.

But these are only my comments on the facts. Mrs.



Vassie viewed them otherwise. The problem she set herself was to keep a dozen persons content in space sufficient for two; to show an appearance of business where there was none doing. This latter endeavor is, I am told, not uncommonly made by business men and others: I doubt if they are, and I am sure I should not be, more successful than Mrs. Vassie. Here were four able-bodied girls, not to speak of the man; you must work off mental and physical energy somehow; and if one errand or job could only have been made to serve for one person, her whole time would have been spent in futile struggle against the exigencies of the situation. Of course one can stop the production of mental and physical energy by withholding food; it was a plan applied to mental conditions at Benscote with success as to the majority; but to starve girls at dinner is not a custom allowed by the feeling of our time, though those girls are often in our days best appreciated who turn least food into actual energy. Anyhow, it consumes as much tissue, and produces as much carbonic acid gas to do useless work as to do that saving a hecatomb of lives; to run an errand takes as much time for each of three companions as for one alone.

From long practice Mrs. Vassie had become capable in inventing business. It was seldom that she could suggest nothing to pass away an hour. When her power of invention arrived at its limit, it was still unsafe to let the girls freely devise jobs and errands for themselves. If they hit upon the same as their mother, where did the advantage come in? If they hit outside her mark, they must break down the boundaries of home life as by law established, and they might upset its internal order. Girls often do not know what is good for them; that is a fixed maxim. Once let

them choose their own way, and they might no longer see that the highest good for a woman lies in being chosen by the first-come, well-behaved man with a good income; or in being chosen for by any older person of either sex in whose house she happens to live. Deny these propositions, and, harmless though at first sight your denial may appear, you have opened the floodgates and let in the roaring torrent of modern thought.

## CHAPTER VIII

### OLD AND YOUNG EYES

Amid plenty to eat and nothing to do, the winter wore away, and the spring-time came to Benscote. Bella had stayed with Uncle Leonard, where nothing of note had happened except that she had caught a violent attack of bezique-playing. During each visit to friends Mrs. Vassie nourished a faint hope that her girls might at length "meet some one"; and as each girl came home leaving the situation unchanged, she made an effort after contentment with things as they were. There were lines deepening about her mouth and eyes that take many years of waiting to form on any face; and her lips pressed themselves together as a habit, so often had she held back her inward protests against the fairness of events.

Tabitha had been to a cousin's near London for a week, and the cousin had taken her to a quiet dance, and to see Maskelyne and Cooke. It had not been easy to find the money for sending her there with a proper equipment, and her parents had hoped that she would appreciate their effort on her behalf, and would come back more contented. "A little change" is considered a sovereign remedy for all girls' complaints.

In this case it did not work. Tabitha longed to be away from Benscote more than ever. She hated the sight of green trees, as a prisoner hates the sight of brick walls. The mind makes its own beauty, and grimy pavements, flickering gas-lamps, flaring shop-windows,

were in her eyes far more beautiful than soft green-sward or rare glow-worm or blinking stars; than flaunting daffodils and all the flowers of spring. With everything active round her, she longed only the more intensely for an activity of her own. She had been bidden to be passive, taught not to rebel against her environment; and so the spring thrilled her, in spite of herself, into a rage for a wider life. The burst of growth in that fertile country seemed to mock her, smiling up at her striving after duty, at her passion for production, at her rare joys and her frequent despair.

On the appointed day the swallows greeted her; months hence they would assemble on the garden-wall for their flitting. As the days came round the gardener dug or planted or swept, waiting on the fixed order of the world. Day by day Mr. Vassie said that the buds on this tree were a week later, or the flowers on that plant a day earlier, than the average date he had calculated upon his careful notes of the last decade. And Mrs. Vassie reminded the girls that it was time they should walk a mile towards the church, or turn an hour out of their road to the station, in order to see if they could not bring the first violets, or tell whether the crop of hyacinths would be heavy. And as, day by day, the hours followed on increasing, then fell to mount once more, the Vassie girls fed and moved and slept, without bidding of their own, till it seemed as though they were dull and passive as trees under the mighty hand of Nature. Nothing that they did or left undone seemed of the slightest consequence in the surrounding monotony. When one of them went out to stay, everything was unchanged till they came back; and except for money's sake, there was no reason why they should not stay a year as well as a month. Tabitha knew that if she died Benscote would

go on the same after perhaps a week of bustle. And then Mary could have a bedroom to herself, as she so much wished. Tabitha was sure she was ready to go to oblige them if it so happened.

But there were manners of going that appeared more interesting if less simple than early death. For I do not believe that youth or maiden ever longs for death, unless, maybe, because it typifies to them the unknown; and of the unknown, of the mysterious, of great possibilities, even of dim and horrible surmises, youth can never dream its fill.

"You can't tell what would happen to a girl in London," said Mrs. Vassie. And Tabitha, starting, only remembered just in time that it was meant for a warning and not for a promise.

"London is so large," said Mrs. Vassie, "and all sorts of people there; a few good, no doubt; even life in a large town cannot spoil everybody. But there must be depths of wickedness. So different from this village, where we know everybody, and what to expect, and where we are in a measure all friends."

"So different, to be sure," echoed Tabitha, but with what contrast of thought and feeling! "I know all this, and I want something else."

"Nothing is so good as what we have, for it is what the Almighty has ordained for us. There is no place like home; it is only an old song, yet it is true, true as daylight; you will find that out by the time you are as old as I am."

"If home is better," said Tabitha, "then the more I compare it with other places the better I shall know."

"Then why not stay quietly at home, accepting the fact?" said Mrs. Vassie. "These are the best years of your life. You'll never be so happy again."



"If my life is never to be happy, I should like to make it useful," said Tabitha.

But the fact was, Tabitha wanted neither to be happy nor to be useful, so much as to know and to do. The unknown for girls has mostly spelt matrimony. Had Tabitha's parents given her the opportunity of meeting marriageable men, I think it likely that she would never have concerned herself with any business in the world, save that which is universally acknowledged to be solely the affair of women. I do not judge that she need have found any impassable bar either in the superabundance of "cleverness" or in the lack of beauty, to which she attached so much importance. And what study of the unknown can be so fascinating to youth or maiden as that which is written in each other's eyes? What experiences are so engrossing as those of the girl Joan and Darby her bridegroom?

If one knows that the curtain covering the unknown will presently be uplifted, does one ever want to run away? But Tabitha and her sisters were as secluded as nuns. There were still young Sawday, the land-agent, and old Mr. Mooney at the vicarage. There was also one new man, come to Ransham Lodge, a Mr. Fewell, sleek and forty, whose future looked assured, though his past dipped into the unknown.

Village girls younger than Tabitha, for they had worn her old frocks—the oldest that were past cutting up for the children—village girls were already coming to the back-door, with rings on their fingers and bells in the baby's hand. It made Tabitha feel hurried and horribly old. Tabitha, meeting the village men on their way home from work, wondered "how the girls could!" Here lay a realm blank and dark to Tabitha's understanding. But of the world of work she had better hopes. Here was a door ajar, and no curtain

waited lifting. Beyond all was dim and confused, and nothing to be seen very plainly. But there were shifting lights and the din of strife and movement; and for the young and eager is not that enough? At least rest and peace and quietness would not be there.

"Tabitha, child, can you not rest?" cried Mrs. Vassie.

"Do let us have some peace and quiet," said Mr. Vassie.

"Miss Tabitha has no rest in her," said the servants. But they had done a good day's work whereby they had gained a standard of comparison. Rest is one of the many guerdons valueless save to the earner.

"Life is short," said Tabitha. "Time enough to rest, sound and sure, when one is dead."

"You like your night's rest as well as we all do," said the sisters. "You're no more ready to get up of a morning than we are."

"I like to rest when I'm tired, not before," said Tabitha, and she nodded and smiled at Hilda, who had bought and burnt many large packets of candles by the light of, which the cousins had pursued those joint studies, so necessary a preface to a brilliant professional future.

Circumstances over which Tabitha had no control had caused the latest move in her path; and it had come to be an accepted thing in the family that she desired to be or do something in the world, though this belief had, so far, not led to any action. There had been a crisis and a crash in the money market; and Mr. Vassie, whose fixed belief in the law of status made an enlargement of his income look almost like a duty, had embarked much of his capital in risky ventures. He plainly showed resentment. Mrs. Vassie struggled hard against the feeling that Providence had made a

bargain with her and then played her false. The fundamental creed of feudalism, and its logical operation in social life, is, perhaps, now sufficiently out of date to need some careful explanation; strange example of passing fashion, for the law of status was a fundamental law for all England, not only when Mr. and Mrs. Vassie were youth and maiden, but for centuries before that time. According to it, the Almighty places each one of his children in a definite spot at birth, and it is a duty binding upon all to stay where they are put, as a soldier stays at his post.

Therefore, you are born a labourer's daughter, so you must be content to eat and to drink, to be clothed, to live and to die. If you are born a gentleman's daughter, then you must be content quietly to occupy the position that gentlemen's daughters had occupied when Mrs. Vassie was a girl. She did not wish to go back to remote times, or to unknown conditions. Things were improved in her day, and for that we, and labourers' daughters, must thank God. But here we must stop. According to all human reckoning there must come a time when each movement must stop. Mrs. Vassie fixed that time in her own youth. Why not? It was the best she had known. And we can but judge according to the intelligence with which God and our parents have provided us.

Classes being fixed, it follows that incomes should be fixed too. She felt in herself, and in all those of gentle birth, a fixed right to a certain style of living, and consequently to a certain income wherewith to purchase the same. A state of society that robbed her, or threatened to rob her, of that income must be defective, neither pleasing to God nor advantageous to man. The causes of such robbery ought to be removed. She did not go far back to search out

causes; how could she with the pressing needs of a husband and ten children to attend to? Nor did she distinguish clearly between the causes and the effects of social change: which of us learned persons does distinguish as clearly as we think we do? She saw that Hilda and Tabitha read much, and were not amenable to old-fashioned discipline; she heard Tabitha's entreaties to go out into the world and work. She knew that she had a less income than at the time of her marriage she had expected to get the spending of. Yet she had to pay the cook and housemaid more wages than she used to pay. She knew arithmetic enough to be aware that if you have a fixed sum to be divided between two persons, should one take more the other will receive less. And it seemed to her to be quite plain that if all would but be content to abide in the place where the Almighty had set them, there would be no social trouble at all. Homes need not be broken up. Striving would become unnecessary. And peace would reign on earth, or at least by her own fireside. What a topsy-turvy world that would be where no respect remained for the sacred law of status: where women were dragged up and set down in accordance with their personal value and intelligence, which might or might not be good gifts; and where little account was taken of the fact of birth, with which God has so directly interfered!

This unrest seemed to her to strike at the root of everything worth preserving. Her daily practise was to thank God that she had been born in England, His favoured land; that she belonged to the middle classes, who are known to be most moral, under the chosen biblical condition of neither poverty nor riches; that she was married, which surely is the best lot for a woman; that she had her own children, who, in spite



of little differences, were so much better than her neighbours'; and that she was living in the middle of this century, after the dreadful wars and miseries that grandmothers told about, yet before the terrible new times that are to be seen rolling in from afar. It seemed to her that she, just as she was, might have been born in a bygone age, or in an age to come, under conditions entirely different from those she had grown up to fit; and surely, if such a frightful calamity be possible, one cannot be too thankful to have been saved from it.

She could not understand why Tabitha and Hilda, who had all these blessings, and besides these the additional one of a good education, which they rated far higher than Mrs. Vassie did, should not rest content in their own place. It struck her as rank ingratitude that having so much they perpetually demanded more. Why did they want to rush into difficulty and danger? For at every stage of progress that was reached in safety, Mrs. Vassie knew that at the next stage all the promised dangers were concentrated.

"Mrs. Vassie," was said to her one day, "girls are like all the world; when things are at their worst and the people have absolutely no privileges they never revolt; when the condition of things is mended in part, then they gather strength to revolt against the evils that are left."

"I am not sure that I understand what you mean," said Mrs. Vassie doubtfully. "It sounds as if you almost wish to excuse people for rebelling against constituted authority. You say that they rebel at one time and do not rebel at another, as if they were puppets flung hither and thither without any God or duty above them. And history, as I learnt it at school, means something very different to that. For my part, I think



obedience, as a duty, ought to be taught more than it is; it would be far more to the point than a list of battles and a number of foreign queens' names."

"Well! that's one view of the situation. But even you would say, all English people would say, that revolt is sometimes justified. There was the revolution in Saispasou last year; all the papers were full of it; there they even went so far as to cut off the heads of their oppressors. They have settled down now; and every one says they rebelled against an intolerable tyranny."

"Poor things! My husband followed it in the papers with great interest, but I do not often find time to read. But we live in England, and it is out of the question to talk about tyranny exercised over my girls. The control Tabitha rebels against is entirely for her good."

"That is precisely the proposition to which she and the rebels in Saispasou alike refuse to agree."

"If I did not know that you can't really think so, I should not know what to believe of you," said Mrs. Vassie, her colour heightening. "I cannot argue, and I do not understand politics. There may be a sad necessity even to cut off the head of a ruler at times. But obedience to one's parents and to one's spiritual pastors and masters, that must be right, whatever else is wrong. And that is what these girls fly in the face of, as you know very well."

"How about the martyrs who were flung to the lions or burned at the stake? One has heard that they sometimes went out alone, and did not always carry the convictions of their families with them?" It was an echo of Tabitha's question long before.

"To us has been given the blessing of a firm faith and a true religion," said Mrs. Vassie, looking up to

heaven in very honest gratitude. "And it is difficult enough for me to do my own duty without trying to decide on other persons' who lived in other times. I am content to leave them to a higher judgment."

But, though she blamed the girls in words, in her heart, in her prayers even, she perpetually reminded herself and the Almighty that there was this difficulty of want of money to contend against; and that if girls had not money to live upon they ought not to be too severely condemned if they went out. Economical questions, though they are of the humblest kind, cannot be settled by reference to moral considerations alone; and every housekeeper has good reason to know that what you feel you ought to do must be balanced against what you know you can pay for. And to pay became more and more difficult as "things" did not pay Mr. Vassie.

The more she thought about it the clearer appeared the convenience of Tabitha's desire to earn money. But it must be by something at home, by something that could be kept secret until success enough had been reached to drown impropriety in glory. Tabitha talked of writing. Mrs. Vassie determined that she would give Tabitha money to buy a fresh packet of lined paper, so as to mark her qualified assent to the career of an authoress.

"Tabitha was always a very forward baby," she said to the daily governess. "I'm sure I did not forget to be thankful at the time, for Jack came close after her, and when there are two in the nursery who cannot walk the nurse is apt to ask for more help than it is quite convenient to give. It makes a great deal of difference when they are babies; but one does not notice it much a year or two later."

"Miss Tabitha must always have been clever, I

think," said Miss Tempest. "Much more clever than any of the children I have to teach. For my part I always thought she might do rather brilliantly. It is a great thing to have ability. What I have done has been by means of sheer hard work."

"If you have to work for your bread, it is, no doubt, a great advantage to have abilities," assented Mrs. Vassie, who looked on brains as a commodity for sale rather than for personal consumption. "But I am quite satisfied with your teaching myself, and so is Mr. Vassie. I don't know that it is desirable for so many to be clever, especially if you have to live in the house with them."

"You are very kind," murmured Miss Tempest. "But do you think Miss Tabitha will never do anything? She is very anxious to try."

"I never did care about my children being clever as I do about their being good," said Mrs. Vassie, to whom the qualities remained antagonistic. "Though if she were going to be an authoress or anything of that kind it might be different;" as if the commodity, cleverness, were one you could use or ignore the possession of as the fancy took you. "Then I might not reproach myself that we sent Tabitha to that school for a year. It cost a great deal of money, and money is not at all plentiful. And if she is more intelligent than the rest she would have done as well as they without any particular advantages. What Mr. Vassie and I feel is that you should devote most of your time to Lizzie, who is not at all bright; all that you can spare from the little boys, that is; of course that they should get on is essential. I never see Lizzie open a book out of the lesson hours. It is to make things more equal. I know that Hilda and Tabitha are studying French and German together; I take no notice; it

keeps them happy and occupied. And for Hilda it may be very convenient. She has scarcely enough to live upon unless she marries, and she will, I suppose, teach some day."

"Hilda is a very good worker. In many branches she has got before me already," said Miss Tempest.

And straightway Mrs. Vassie began reckoning whether in another year or two Hilda could teach the little ones. She would cost less than Miss Tempest, and would be saved from a plunge into the world. And the money saved would come in a year or two hence for Geoffrey to go to college, where there was no hope of his getting a scholarship. She planned it all years beforehand, knowing that a careful mother should not be taken unawares. Her idea of justice, like that of many persons of greater philosophic pretension, lay in equality and uniformity throughout her kingdom. If nature had made a mistake, so to speak, and had not formed the children equal, then her part was to flatten these inequalities, and to reduce things to a dead level. Nevertheless, there must be writers, and there must be money; should Tabitha earn some by her pen, it would conveniently solve many difficulties.

## CHAPTER IX

### A DIVERSION

Tabitha had not kept her longings and her perplexities to herself when she spent her week in London. And our relatives are often ready to worry themselves about the future of "poor Edward's ten children," and to discuss the chances of their falling on their friends for maintenance "should anything happen."

Mr. Vassie's cousin, who had a large family of her own, made a diversion in Tabitha's favour. She wrote to Tabitha to say that a sister-in-law of her husband's wanted for a delicate child a daily teacher, whose acquirements need not be great, and whose hours would not be long, but of whose antecedents she must know something.

"It occurred to me," wrote Cousin Lydia, "that it might suit you. And I have no doubt I could get you the place at once if you choose to take it."

"Well, Tabitha! Does this mean that you've been complaining of your home to your Cousin Lydia? I really should hope not."

"I should like to go," said Tabitha, sticking to the main point.

"We know nothing about it yet; and I don't at all know that papa would approve of your going to London, though of course it makes a difference being people we know. Yet I don't know what people would say if we did allow it."

"What does it matter what people say? What can they say? The thing is to do what's right."



"My dear, that's all very well. But it doesn't do for the world we have to live in. People will be apt to say that your father has lost all his money. It might destroy your sisters' chances. I should be glad to see you happily married, but men are not ready to marry a girl who has no money at all; and I can't imagine that any man would care to marry a girl who had been so very independent, living in London and all that sort of thing."

"I wonder what salary they would pay," said Tabitha, seeing rifts in her mother's fixed determination, and rushing in to take full advantage of them.

"If it had been a resident post now," said Mrs. Vassie, doubtfully. "But where can you live?"

"There must be places that would do," said Tabitha, vaguely. "Cheap places."

"If it were in too cheap a place it might make people talk, and would injure your brother's position. Dear Geoffrey will be coming to town soon. And yet I'm sure things are paying so badly your father will say he cannot pay much for you."

"If we're poor why need we be ashamed of it?" said Tabitha.

"But we're not poor, not like many people are. It's only that things don't pay. It's absurd to talk about poverty. If you choose to make yourself contented here, you could have everything that is proper for girls, and a beautiful home."

Tabitha sighed. She had thought herself a step nearer to the attainment of her desire, and here she was carried back to the initial argument.

"You are so changeable, Tabitha, there is no pleasing you. A while ago you talked of writing, of publishing some stories; have you given that up? That is a thing you could do at home, in your spare time."

"I can't write at home; perhaps I couldn't anywhere; I've no place, and just as I get in the middle I'm always disturbed."

"That's unreasonable, Tabitha. While you live at home you must expect to take your share with the others."

"I'll write and ask Cousin Lydia what they'll pay; and whether she knows a place where I could live. Perhaps she'll take me herself; she's very kind."

"I shall answer the letter myself," said Mrs. Vassie. "While you are in my house I wish everybody to see that I direct your doings. In my opinion Lydia Laslett should have written to me in the first place. When you've a home of your own you can do as you please."

"I might write too," said Tabitha. "I don't believe Cousin Lydia thought it altogether silly that one of us should go out and do something."

"Mrs. Laslett should have enough to do to manage her own family. Four girls, are there? And only one of them engaged. And if Tom Laslett has any money to leave them it is quite new. They were very poor indeed when first they married; and your father's uncle thought it a very poor match. Tom Laslett's father did nothing for him, nothing at all. As for writing to her, I beg you'll do nothing of the kind. And if you've been discussing your father's judgment and mine with the Lasletts, I can only say that I consider it most unbecoming. Such things should at least be kept to ourselves."

"It only shows," said Tabitha; "if I'd never said at the Lasletts' that I wanted to do something, she'd never have thought of me now."

Mrs. Vassie, sitting before her writing materials, was inclined to think that Tabitha had better go; though she was sorry that the proposal had come through the Lasletts, who had not fulfilled the poor promise of

their early marriage. Tom Laslett's professional opinion is of much worth in his own line. And the sphere of Mrs. Laslett's influence is not bounded by lines.

"DEAR LYDIA,

"Tabitha tells me that you have written to her about some post as governess to a delicate child of the Goodhursts'. I remember seeing them when they were engaged. Of course she brought the letter to me at once. Please write to me again to tell me more about the work and the salary offered. I suppose it will be something handsome, as it is a position of some confidence, and the Goodhursts are wealthy. He must have inherited a large fortune from his father. And Tabitha is generally thought to be clever, and had a very first-rate education, which her father and I gave her without any thought of her using it, as I need not say. So she is quite capable of teaching any child, even if she is rather advanced for her age. Tabitha wishes me to ask these further particulars, but I am not at all sure that I should wish her in any case to take the post. Edward and I are not at all in favour of girls going out into the world. I dare say I'm old-fashioned, but I do not at all approve of the line girls are taking now; and if Tabitha does go to London I wish it to be quite understood that it is in spite of her father's wishes and mine. She is well aware of that; but as she still persists, we think she may as well go for a few months and try if she can find any suitable place to live. She will probably be tired of it by that time; and then I hope she will come home to lead a life which is more in accordance with a girl's duty, in which you and I, my dear Lydia, were brought up. I shall wait to hear from you before discussing the matter with Edward, as I fear it will be painful."

"Edward can, when he pleases, make a discussion very painful," said Mrs. Laslett, tossing the letter across the table to her husband. "She's so careful to explain that they've got plenty of money that I think they must be rather hard up. And those poor children haven't any pocket-money, which I think much too bad at their age. Between the lines I read that she'll be disappointed if this child does not get the work."

"I know exactly what Ned Vassie had from his father. And he's never earned a day's wages since he was married. He always was fond of a bit of a spec. I shouldn't wonder if he's got heavily dipped in Americans. To get one of the girls out would be something. They'll never marry in that out-of-the-way place down there. None of Ned's boys are doing very much; and the one at Oxford sets up to be the son of a rich man."

"They want to know where she can live if she does come."

"Why not have her here till she turns round?"

"No; never interfere in family squabbles if you value a quiet life. There's been a disagreement between them somewhere. Let them fight it out their own way. I dare say Tabitha's been partly in the wrong. Very likely she has a temper, though she's never shown it to me. And I'm sure girls now-a-days always manage to get quite enough of their own way, if I may judge of our girls and the friends they bring home. If I had her here after this letter the Vassies would take it for granted that I'd encouraged the child in doing what they don't approve. If things are as you say, it is a good thing that at least one of them should be put in the way of earning her living. But the girl's ready enough to go. If she hung back there might be some good in interfering or offering some further inducement. We don't want to have Edward Vassie's

children come upon us; we have quite enough to do to look after our own. If Edward Vassie had worked half as hard as you've done, he'd be a rich man by this time. As for a place to live, Lady Pounsford was telling me about a boarding-house that she and some others have started for girls who are working. It sounded like a very good thing, but I didn't take much notice at the time. And I couldn't, I really couldn't have the Goodhursts' governess living in my house. Tabitha Vassie had much better go to the other end of London near her work, and I shall tell them so. If anything went wrong with the Goodhurst child—and you know how delicate she is, and how spoiled—it would all fall upon me."



## CHAPTER X

### STRUGGLES WITH WORDS

It rained in torrents the last night before Tabitha's start in life. All day long there had been bursts of sunshine succeeded by the furious storms of a young year, and after sunset the storm fell without hindrance. She was packing her box, hesitating between taking and leaving a great many useless trifles and treasures which had been the constant companions of all her life. Mr. Vassie and his political party are apt to declare that the possession of personal property is necessary for the development of the individual, and that to hold all things in common would mean the lowering of the national character. For my part I assent to their opinion, and therefore for me there is something very pitiful in the fact that many a grown woman, living in the midst of luxury of a sort, can call no single thing upon earth her own, save and except a trumpery work-box and a desk, a few trinkets of little value and often of less beauty, and perhaps half-a-dozen books, most of which her mind has outgrown, though her sentiments still cling round them. And even these poor trifles are not wholly her own; she cannot dispose of them according to her own uncontrolled fancy; if she were to break them, throw them away, or even give them to a friend, there would be recriminations, expostulations, and she would find that though she was allowed to call them her own, of real power over them she had none.

Tabitha was turning over rubbish, regretfully deciding to leave behind her, because her box was full, some books, and some cheap china vases, and half-a-dozen framed photographs.

Mrs. Vassie came in with flushed cheeks and quivering hands and seated herself on the edge of Hilda's bed. To her this was a grand occasion. Her heart was full. She felt that when a daughter was stepping out into life, a mother should have much to say by way of wise advice and loving counsel. It was really almost as serious as if Tabitha had been going to be married; only in that case Mrs. Vassie, judging by precedent, would have known what she ought to say. The situation was complicated by Tabitha's obstinacy; it was almost as if she were obstinately set on marrying a man of whom her father disapproved; which is certainly a situation demanding delicate treatment on the part of the bride's mother. Warning must, of course, prevail over congratulation. It must be made quite plain that the woman, having chosen her own way, must blame no one but herself for the consequences; and yet the bride's mother must fain hope that the prophets of evil will be for once false in their reckoning. Yet this case was not identical with that; and the same sort of advice would not serve. For in marriage, any marriage, there is always the husband, who relieves a mother from the solemn expectation that her particular advice will be followed to the letter. Here was Tabitha, who had indeed been a naughty and tiresome child; but she was Tabitha still, and Mrs. Vassie's clever and dear daughter. None of the others were quite like her. She had been such a forward child. Mrs. Vassie remembered clearly about the great Lord Macaulay's youth; vaguely she recalled the names of other distinguished persons who are reputed to have

been, like Tabitha Vassie, forward in their babyhood. In spite of herself she hoped that Tabitha might make a grand success in London. She had read of girls who did such things; and Mr. Vassie was so clever that one of his children might be expected to distinguish herself. Perhaps Tabitha might write a book, or be a great woman of some sort; the sort that folks write a biography of, and tell in the beginning who the fathers and mothers were, and how their personality accounts for it all. Or she might marry a great man; there must be many such in London, and why not Tabitha as well as another?

Mrs. Vassie was tossed to and fro between pride and dread; it was unfortunate that she always broke into speech when the dread had possession of her. She went on to consider how in London, besides brilliant successes, there are dangers great and manifold, and wicked and terrible men. Tabitha must be warned against these. And then there surged up in Mrs. Vassie's mind all that she had ever heard tell of wickedness in London society.

"Tabitha," she said; "you are going to London against your father's and my wish, and I do not know what dangers and trials may not await you there. You are young and inexperienced, and I hope you will always be very particular. Of course Miss Meal will always be ready to advise you and to chaperon you, but when she has so many young ladies under her charge she must at times be very busy. And I hope you will remember that a young girl should never be out after dark unaccompanied." The wind sighed distressfully, and the rain rattled like shot on the pane. "In rough weather, especially," added Mrs. Vassie hastily. "And—a well—a tolerably good-looking girl will always find that men are ready to pay her attention, if she has a little

money; and though you don't think much of my advice now, you will find out that London is very different to our village, and you will always find your papa ready to advise you what is wise to do, in any emergency that may arise. And get to bed early; in London people spoil their health and their eyes sitting up too late; and be careful, you cannot be too careful, what acquaintances you make. And remember that you will be costing a great deal of money, more than is spent on your sisters; we expect you to make the most of your advantages; for you've very good ability, Tabitha, no one has differed as to that; you can do well if you choose. You have always your home to come to; though I do not, and your father does not, approve of your action, we shall always be glad to welcome you back, and shall be proud of any success you may make. After a while, thrown on your own resources, you will find, what you are so loth to believe now, that there is no place like a happy home, and that no one cares for you so much as your own parents."

Tabitha straightened her back and set her teeth together like a soldier who is going on dangerous duty.

"Unless I am ill, I shall not come back," said she, looking towards the storm out of doors.

"When you are ill, my dear, your mother's arms will always be open to you, and your home," said Mrs. Vassie tenderly.

"I'm stronger than the others; I don't mean to be ill," said Tabitha bravely. The world showed itself that night in very dismal aspect, and she was a little appalled at the near prospect. And she had not a fluent tongue. She wanted to say that she knew that they were doing much for her, and that she would try to justify the outlay, about which she had heard so many reproaches.



And Mrs. Vassie wanted to say that let Tabitha do and say what she might, she loved her still, and would love her always, and would rejoice over any success not less than Tabitha herself.

But it cannot be said that either party to the dialogue succeeded in making her innermost meaning plain. Want of mastery over words is a greater divider than even a too great fluency of speech.

It was better to come to simple advice again.

"And try to be always nicely dressed. People do dress a good deal in London, of course. Yet it would not be suitable that a girl alone in London should be anything but very quietly dressed; otherwise you might attract notice of a very undesirable kind."

"Yes, mamma," said Tabitha. These things were written in the family precepts. She would have liked something fresh and more specially applicable to her new career.

"Perhaps you will want a new evening dress. You will be expected to dress for dinner at Miss Meal's."

"We have supper, not dinner," said Tabitha, who had taken these things into consideration.

"The same thing, no doubt, except that it may be a little later. Well! Of course papa and I wish you to have whatever is proper. You can write home if you need anything more. Young girls naturally like to be dressed like their friends. And I think I can trust you, Tabitha, not to be extravagant. You know how heavy our expenses are, with the boys and all. So you will try to make the £40 a year that Mrs. Goodhurst allows you do; and then there's your dress and pocket-money. I should expect Mrs. Goodhurst to raise your allowance very soon; next quarter, perhaps."

"I'll try," said Tabitha. "And I expect we shall all



work too hard to have much time for going out to parties."

"There is plenty of society in London; and it is well for young girls to go out," said Mrs. Vassie. "There will, no doubt, be Miss Meal's friends; and she is very well connected."

"Yes; I suppose so."

"And I suppose you will go to the church Miss Meal attends on Sunday. Do you know which one it is?"

"Yes; I suppose so, sometimes," said Tabitha, who had promised herself the pleasure of visiting all the large churches in turn, and hearing the fine preachers.

"And I wish you to promise me never to go to evening church alone. Your father and I were talking it over, and we agree that it is not suitable. You can go in the morning, but in the evening only if you have an escort. I do not at all approve of the way in which young girls go about alone now. And I do not like to speak of such things to a girl, and should never mention it if you were not rushing into so unprotected a position; but by those who know the world it is well known that men of a very undesirable sort frequent the evening services for the sake of the people they meet there. One reads of such things; it is very shocking; most profane indeed; they had better really stay away if no higher motive guides them. It is not like our own little quiet village, and even here you know I never allow one of you to go to evening church alone." Mrs. Vassie had the terrified countenance of one who describes her latest nightmare. "Ah! Tabitha; I'm sorely afraid I'm not right in letting you go."

"I can't stop now," said Tabitha hurriedly. "I must go. You have settled with Miss Meal, and she is keeping my room. We should have to pay anyhow. And I've entered my name at the class and promised Mrs.

Goodhurst. There are too many of us at home, and it is much better that one of us should go out. We can't all stay at home with nothing to do except grow older every year. We should grow like the Miss Ides, and they're all dull and stupid and nagging."

"A child like you cannot know how wicked the world is," sighed Mrs. Vassie.

"Perhaps I shall know soon," said Tabitha. "We needn't go out of the village to know that you may lose your character, and deserve to lose it, stopping at home."

"It is not nice to speak of such things," said Mrs. Vassie. "I don't know who can have told you about them. I don't wish to discuss them with you."

She was startled, finding herself on the brink of Tabitha's mind. She felt it was so unfitting that Tabitha, an unmarried girl, should have any opinion on wickedness of that sort. Such information came to women from their husbands, who not only supplied the information, but also the opinions that should be publicly held concerning it. To be sure Tabitha was older than her mother had been when she heard of such things from Mr. Vassie, who, like many another quiet man, was not over nice as to the nature of the stories he told his wife. But age has nothing to do with such proprieties. In Mrs. Vassie's youth grey-headed old maids posed in general company for being, and perhaps actually were, as ignorant of the ways of the world as school-girls. Mrs. Vassie had an unmarried sister, with a certain income, who was content to believe in the world as she found it in sermons at her parish church, and in the lighter fiction. This sister quoted Mr. Vassie's statements with whole-hearted veneration; and had for Mrs. Vassie's opinion a reverence which Tabitha did not show, but which Mrs.

Vassie considered the due of a married woman, who must have passed through so many experiences.

Tabitha was certainly irritating. She went on with her packing, wrapping in paper a couple of china ornaments of more value than the average among Tabitha's possessions.

"What are you taking there? You have not asked if you might have them."

"I thought they were mine," said Tabitha; and instead of asking nicely she put them back on the shelf.

"Certainly not; they belonged to my dear mother. And I never should give them away."

"I didn't know you cared about them. They've stood here since I can remember. It's no matter."

She was determined not to make a fuss about anything. And what is a china ornament more or less when one is stepping out into life? It is but one rootlet the more to tear, so tiny that in the general wrench it is unfelt.

Then there was a pause. Tabitha was thinking of all the wonderful deeds she would do, and of how she would make the name of Vassie celebrated, and of how, when she earned a great deal of money, she would throw her house open to the children and the boys; and of how she would buy presents for them all, finer than any china ornaments on any mantelpiece. She intended to improve and enlighten the world, so that even London should, in future, be not so wicked a spot. She could not do much, but a little is something; and if everybody did a little! And she thought how the whole world is bound together, each one bound to work for the common good. That was what she thought. What she said was, "Is there a strap to my box?" And as the huskiness in her voice could not have been due to

tender emotion, speaking of a box-strap, it must have been due to ill-temper.

Mrs. Vassie thought how good Tabitha was to look upon, and how she might have been going away with a good husband on the morrow; or how, if all that had happened years ago, she might have been now sitting with a dear baby in her arms, instead of a red flannel dressing-gown. And she thought how, perhaps, Tabitha's parents had been to blame for this climax, in that they had not remembered how time sped. And she grieved over this waste of Tabitha's gifts, which in a happy marriage might have found so wide a scope. She thought many motherly thoughts. But what she said, rising offended, was—

“You do not pay me the compliment of pretending to take my advice to heart, Tabitha. But I think you need not just now dwell upon such trivialities as a box-strap.”

And so the occasion closed.

The same train that carried Tabitha away from Benscote took from Mrs. Vassie half-a-dozen letters to her friends in and near town.

“No doubt you will be surprised to hear of Tabitha's taking a situation in London, and she is entering herself as a student in some of the Kensington classes. Her father and I wish every one to understand that it is not at all in accordance with our wishes. We distinctly disapprove.”

## CHAPTER XI

### TABITHA'S WAY

So at last Tabitha had her way. And what a way it was! Mr. Vassie took her up to town when he was going to some meeting of a learned society. It was a day too late for Tabitha's classes, but who could expect a man of Mr. Vassie's learning to waste a whole day for the sake of a girl who as yet knew nothing?

One might have thought that Tabitha was bound for a distant continent, so much her mother wept, so solemn an occasion did the other girls take this to be. All the same they couldn't help enjoying it. So little happened to them as a general rule. And then they were romantic, as young things are; they never believed that Tabitha was going to do any of the dreadful things darkly hinted at by the seniors; Tabitha was Tabitha, and they knew they could reckon upon her. Young folks see into the heart of things with their lynx eyes. They easily detect exaggeration. It is romance they love, and not tragedy. They had read tales of geniuses, misunderstood of their own folk, who nevertheless had, in years to come, accomplished all sorts of wonderful events. They had told Tabitha she wasn't a genius; it doesn't do to let sisters think too well of themselves, especially when they are at home, and come third in the family; but in their heart of hearts they dreamed it might be; and to go out like this is just what a genius in a biography might be expected to do. They knew Tabitha was clever; on



that one point all were agreed; how clever one must be to accomplish greatness is what no man knows. And though cleverness sometimes looks like a congenital defect in daily home life, it is always transformed into a valuable possession when you go away from home to "do things." And they knew that there would be more room at Benscote for three than for four. Young folks are mostly selfish, though they are seldom sordid.

The elder girls were not in the least jealous; they were agreed that they would not care to be in Tabitha's shoes; they felt assured that they had something better than cleverness, something that kept them at home quiet and uncomplaining.

Hilda put her arms round Tabitha's neck and whispered, "Remember! When I am twenty-one. Remember!"

Hilda had given her a whole five-pound-note; the first Tabitha had ever possessed. And of her very own she had more than two pounds, the savings of years, begun in days when the missionaries seemed the only justifiable persons to save for.

Mr. Vassie had taken his *Times* to read on the way. Tabitha had spent sixpence on a novel. I have wondered sometimes which read less, or pretended to read more diligently.

The house where Mr. Vassie deposited his daughter is a tall, yellow-bricked, thin, and thin-walled building, in a gloomy back street, painfully near to the Brompton cemetery. People about there were then beginning their successful usurpation of the name of a fashionable quarter. The house was kept at that time by a decayed gentlewoman of a certain age, as a boarding-house for women and girls at work. The advantage to her was that she had no other means of livelihood; the advantage to them that they did not pay much. There

was a considerable basement; three or four steep steps of grey stone, peeling off in flakes, led up to the door, whose paint had risen in blisters. The house looks west, but the street is narrow, and in winter and early spring, when the afternoon is yet early, the sun sinks behind the tall public-house opposite. The door was opened by a short maid with a smutty face, and with her cheeks tied in a strip of grey stuff. Miss Meal was at home, waiting in her parlour to receive Mr. Vassie. She lifted the blind ever such a little bit to see what he looked like, and to be sure that the small maid did her duty. She had gone to the expense of a muffin, and to the trouble of toasting it herself over the kitchen fire for his tea. She had on her second-best dress too, for Mr. Vassie was a fine gentleman in comparison to many of her inmates' fathers; and in her palmy days Miss Meal had been in the habit of meeting gentlemen of Mr. Vassie's quality.

But Mr. Vassie, as so often when his children were in a difficult place, had urgent business which withdrew him from the scene where they had to play a part. He would not come in. Truth to say, the sight of the dirty maid and the sordid house filled him with compunction. He remembered what his friend Curling had said about Tabitha's looks and her intelligence. But if he had not left Tabitha there, what could he have done with her? And if he did leave her there, the less he knew about the details of the place the less could he be blamed. He had not carried on the correspondence with Miss Meal; all he had done was to guarantee the money; he thought it best that women should manage for girls, and be answerable for what they did for them.

If he had not left Tabitha there, what could he do with her? He would then be forced to determine on

an original course of action. Could he drag a girl about town with him? Could she accompany him to his club, or to his meeting? And if he took her to the hotel for the night, something would have to be done next morning, besides paying the bill. What would his wife say? She had arranged this, and women know girls best. Indeed men do not know at all. Where else could he leave Tabitha? And she certainly would not come back home with him, even if he overlooked the wanton waste of double railway fare. In all London Mr. Vassie had not a single acquaintance to whom he could apply for advice in this dilemma. He was not fond of asking advice. It had been his lifelong habit to lay down the law to women, and to allow them meanwhile to manage his life. As he reasoned with himself he began already to find excuses; to persuade himself that Miss Meal's house was a very suitable home for Tabitha, who, if she did not like it, had nothing to do but to come back to Benscote again, acknowledging herself in the wrong. It was certainly wholesome for girls to acknowledge themselves in the wrong, and would do Tabitha good. If Miss Meal's house were to be very uncomfortable indeed, might it not turn out to be a providential arrangement, causing the right, the right of parents, to triumph?

"Good-bye, Tabitha," he said kindly. "Remember you have come here to please yourself. If you don't like it you have nothing to do but to come home, and to live just as before."

The door was opened and then shut, leaving Mr. Vassie outside, and Miss Meal in a bad humour. If Mr. Vassie had come in Tabitha would have got a hearty welcome and a share of the muffin; as it was, that might be a bad precedent; besides which, if you do not cut things very close, what hope is there of a

woman of fifty making enough out of a few needy girls to support her for the rest of her life? Miss Meal considered that the muffin would keep till the morrow, when another girl's parents of less consequence might eat it warmed up. She was a meagre woman, with eyes like slits, sloping upwards, and ringlets furnishing her pointed face. The ringlets were a protest against modern fashions, with which she had no sympathy. In all her theories of life she aggressively protested; but she eagerly conformed to the ways of the world on all the few occasions when she found it possible.

She had failed to make her own patrimony go as far as it should have done towards her support, and in middle life she found herself nearly destitute. So with her own grudging approval and with the willing help of several idle men and women, who imagined that they were doing a good deed, she set up her boarding-house, and spent the scanty earnings of her boarders less lavishly but no less foolishly than she had once spent her own. Tabitha sat down to tea with three or four girls and women who had been working hard, or trying hard to get work, all day long. They were all of them poor. They looked thin and shabby. Some had brought a book to the table, and were studying while they ate; daily teachers vainly trying to keep themselves up to "modern requirements," of which they spoke fearsomely, as if it were some terrible bogey, having no relation to life except when it crushed the helpless. There were a few students in the South Kensington schools, many of them women past learning-time, who had saved up a tiny sum for a short training. They conversed continually on the prospects of their calling and on their chances in the next examination; telling for the hundredth time that so and so was not a favourite with the authorities; and the thing,



if you wanted to get work was, to keep in with them at all costs.

Miss Meal had introduced the new-comer. That was part of her programme. She liked her boarders to see that she knew what was proper in society. And indeed for what else did they keep her on the premises? Each one paid to Miss Meal eighteen shillings a week, much more than the market value of their board and lodging; the residue went to the maintenance of Miss Meal, as a figure-head. She did not work; the small servant was kept for that. She did not accompany the girls into society, for they had neither time nor money to spend upon such pleasures. She did not advise; she had no sympathy, and less knowledge. No; nothing of that kind. These girls and women who were so poor, paid out of their earnings to keep a lady of leisure belonging to them; the older ones because they would not yet acknowledge that they were no longer young; the young ones for the satisfaction of saying, or of allowing their friends far away at the other end of the British Isles to say, "My daughter is living in the house of a Miss Meal, a maiden lady. I've not seen her myself, but I believe she is very well connected. She has a cousin in the Church. I do not know if General Sir Theophilus Meal is also a relation, but I think it likely. I do not approve of girls living unprotected. It is a thing I should never allow."

And none of the parents and guardians had the insight to see that the first things a growing girl or working woman needs is to have plenty of wholesome food, and an airy bedroom, and a good fire when the weather is cold; and that after she has paid for these, she may, if she pleases, with superfluous cash, supposing her to have it, buy a chaperon, of any expensive variety that her means will run to. The cheapest kind of chaperon



is a comfortable person who will cook the dinner and poke the fire; who, having worked herself and lived on wages, knows what sort of food is needful to work upon, and how to spend the money that her girls earn. But then twenty years ago that sort of chaperon would certainly not have been related to General Sir Anybody Anything; there could be no tickling doubt about it. And though she would take good care of her girls all the long year round, she would be unfit to escort them to a single party in the season.

Tabitha went out for a walk after tea, feeling it strange to be alone, needing to give no account of her movements. It seemed to her as if she might have walked off into space and never be inquired of more. Being a fine evening there were crowds loitering on the way, among them undesirable sort of men, who looked at her, so that Tabitha remembered her mother's warning and hurried on. She passed street after street, turning to right and left alternately, so that she might be sure of finding her way back. She kept her eyes straight before her, walking very fast, with the instruction always in her mind that in London you must seem to be full of business if you do not wish to come to harm. Turning thus at random, she came presently to the gates of the big cemetery, out of which were shuffling men and women with flushed faces and in mourning clothes. But a stream of people was setting in, for there, among London's departed and forgotten, is the cheerfulest and gayest walk that many of them have. Even the mourners, Tabitha thought, did not look properly sorry. Trees waved overhead, and flowers blossomed, and over the whole an official air of neatness lay.

A fragile, ill-clad girl came timidly up to Tabitha,

from where she had stood perplexed on the centre path.

"Can you tell me," she said, "where the new corner is: where they buried people yesterday?"

Tabitha said she was a stranger.

"Ah!" said the girl, "I come from so far off; I didn't know. They're all strange to me," and she turned back and stood again on the pathway, irresolute and frightened.

Tabitha felt sorry for the girl, and was impelled to speak further with her; but she had heard strange and alarming tales of women in London who, got-up to look like what they are not, ask their way of newcomers.

And so these two solitary girls shrank away from one another, Tabitha feeling hastily in her pocket, lest her purse might be gone. Then she came on some new-made graves, some that the gravedigger was hastily filling in, and another already beaten by the rains of the pervious night, where a woman in widow's weeds was crying. Tabitha watched her for a minute, with a half surprise that she behaved so like a country widow, in all the tragedy and newness of grief. It was disappointing. The attraction of London lay in its unlikeness to the home she had looked on the surface of for so many years. London, in this first walk, was not so wicked, nor so fine, nor so dangerous, nor so anything as she had been given to suppose. There seemed no chance of an adventure. And coming home by the same streets she dared to look about her, to walk slower, even to stop before a row of shops, determining what she should buy for Christmas, to give to Mary, and Bella, and the boys when her ship should have come home, as it certainly must, laden with a valuable freightage.

The twilight had fallen, and all the lamps were lighted, before Tabitha rang at Miss Meal's bell, and she half expected that Miss Meal or some one would ask her where she had been to that she had stayed so late. But the same servant let her in without a word, and Tabitha was once more in the narrow strip of room which alone she could call her own place in all London city.

In the underground dining-room the table was spread for supper. There was a loaf of bread, a lump of salt butter, and the heel of a Dutch cheese. Nothing else. Miss Meal's supper, paid for by these foolish girls, was frizzling savoury next door over the kitchen fire.

"If you wish for beer it shall be fetched from opposite, Miss Vassie," said Miss Meal, looking in. "It is an extra, but several of the young ladies have it. Or you can order extra milk to be taken another day, if you prefer that."

"I thought she wouldn't stay long," said one of the boarders. "Nasty old cat! though when there's such a little bit of butter, she often does come down, so that we mayn't like to send out for more. That's not a bit more than there was last night, and were one less. I shall ask for more; or will you, Miss Adnitt?"

"I'm not hungry," said Tabitha, to whom it seemed a first part of a woman's good manners to be self-denying over food.

"Take my advice, and don't begin on that tack," said Miss Adnitt. "It's all very well at home, but here you'll never get your money's worth if you don't try for it. The old lady's putting by in the Post-office. I saw her book, and the receipts come by post. And the more she can screw out of us the more she gets for herself. I care more about my own savings than hers, I can assure you."

She helped herself to the last piece of butter as the girl came in with the beer.

"This cheese is drier than ever," grumbled another.

"It's come to the end," said Tabitha, determined to make the best of things. "It is never the best moment in the life of a cheese. But it has its advantages, for to-morrow we must begin on a new one."

"You little know the ways of this world," laughed a student with fluffy hair. "We shall have to teach you much while you are here, I see. This never was a new cheese within the memory of man. You buy heels a whole halfpenny a pound cheaper, besides which you would eat more if it were at all mild or appetizing. Miss Meal does not believe in the pampering of appetites, save and except her own."

"Miss Meal," said Miss Adnitt, sharpening her pencil on a table-knife preparatory to making a sketch of the new-comer; "Miss Meal belongs to that large class of persons who look upon the ingestion of food as a pastime, and allot the largest share to those who have least of other things to do."

After supper most of the boarders dispersed. Miss Adnitt begged an extra scuttle of coals in honour of Tabitha.

"I told the girl you were a millionaire, and would take that into account at Christmas if she produced the coals now. I hope it is true for the sake of my credit. Miss Meal told us something of the kind last night when the post came in. I didn't believe it. We are not exactly framed for the entrapping of such fine birds. Still, you may be. In that case, I will put in a first plea for myself in the days when you throw off your disguise, and, after the manner of the fairy tales, proceed to enrich us all."

Miss Meal came in, having finished her supper.



"So you are not out to-night, Miss Adnitt?" she said. "And this large fire? This time of year a fire is scarcely needed. But you will be going to your own apartment soon; some of this fuel might be placed on my fire upstairs. I was about to invite Miss Vassie to my room for an hour."

"By all means," said Miss Adnitt. "I should be sorry to deprive Miss Vassie of the pleasure of a chat with you up-stairs. But I'll keep my fire, thank you. I propose to stay here till bed-time. And I hold the strange opinion that a room underground needs more fire than even an up-stairs parlour."

"She doesn't care for your company," added Miss Adnitt, as Miss Meal closed the door behind her. "She only hoped she saw her way to saving half a scuttleful of coals. She despises us all, though she lives out of us. She is evidently inclined to be civil to you; are you, after all, the millionaire in disguise, and the old thing sniffs it out? She daren't turn me away because one of her lady patronesses pays part for me, and she takes me cheap for the sake of pleasing the powers that be. My mother, years ago, was Lady Pounsford's governess; so you see we've always been of the lower working orders: hence her little ways! Mother, when she was old enough to have known better, married a painter without a penny. You see the sum-total before you. It feels hopeless, sometimes. But this fire is lovely. You don't know how nice it feels when you generally have to turn out into the cold of a night to turn the honest penny."

"Is that what most of them are gone for?"

"Some. Some go to classes, to improve what they are pleased to call their minds, after turning the honest penny all day, and a few have friends. We are all erroneously supposed to have friends to invite us from



Saturday to Monday. There's an extra charge of three shillings if we stay here. I buy a bit of something over night and eat it in the Park when it is fine. The bother is if it turns out unexpectedly wet. There's nowhere to go to, and if you stay without notice Mealy charges you all the same, and makes it an excuse to give you no dinner worth speaking of. She says there's nothing in the house."

"Don't she and the girl eat?"

"She does. The girl not much. I think she has a bit of steak, and puts it over the fire till it is as black as your hat. Once upon a time the poor thing had to share her bit of steak with me; I suppose she had an ounce or two more than her allowance, and Mealy thought it would do for two. Mealy had a cold partridge, I remember, that somebody had sent her."

"But people recommended her," said Tabitha. "If she is as you say, how is that?"

"They don't know. What do they, the grand persons who recommend things, ever know of the way you and I live? I beg your pardon; I forgot. You are the millionaire. Mealy assured us last night that your father was a country gentleman with I don't know what private fortune of his own. All I can say is, I don't know how anything but extremity drove you or anybody here. Perhaps you pay more, and Mealy will let you feel it at once if you do. You'll enjoy it, I dare say; to feel you're superior to the rest must be enjoyable. I'm always at the bottom of my neighbours' consideration. That's justice, you know. These grand ladies wanted to set Mealy up in something. She had some sort of claim on them, I suppose, and if we don't keep her, they must, you see. Besides, what do they know of what we want, or of how we live? They pay an idle woman who is oldish and rather ugly to follow

their own daughters about the world; and they think Mealy, who is older, and extremely ugly, a suitable person to look after us. Poor old Mealy! She does not trouble herself to do anything of the sort. Provided we go out, and she saves the cost of her food, what does she care? And it's our own fault for keeping her hanging round our necks. Why do we ape the manners of the people we don't belong to?"

"We couldn't live alone," said Tabitha with certainty.

"Hundreds of girls do."

"But not ladies."

"Perhaps not. It depends upon what you call ladies; they call themselves so. And they are nearer to us than to the common girls, workmen's daughters and such like. There's a girl just my age working in our studio; her father's a mechanic. When she takes to painting pictures do you think anybody will pay more for my work than hers because my gentility causes me to support, for the sake of appearance, a share of Miss Meal? Miss Meal's not a scrap of good to any of us. She doesn't know an oleograph from an oil-painting. Those horrible oleographs in her sitting-room are, in her opinion, fine originals by a modern master. Is she likely to help me on in my profession? Or you in yours? The world's rate of pay for such work as we can do is not calculated for the support of more than one. I often go to bed hungry, and I don't enjoy the sensation any more because, as a matter of fact, Mealy has eaten half my dinner."

"Hungry! But it's dreadful to think that a lady should go hungry."

Miss Adnitt laughed.

"People are always horrified at that statement of fact. Why? Is not the whole world moved by hunger? Nine-tenths of the people you meet in the street know

what it means to go to bed hungry. Sometimes I think you can pick out the few who do not know, by the absence of lines on their faces. You'll go to bed hungry before you are here long, not because you can't afford to pay for food; I dare say you can, though I can't; but because Miss Meal sees that it is profitable to provide food that we none of us can swallow if we chance to come in tired to death. And being tired to death happens to us all by turns. Your turn will come. I dare say it will do you good. Life is never the same again when once you have known these things from experience. In a flash you find there are many things you understand that you didn't before."

"But it can't be wholesome to be hungry. It might injure one's health. I don't mind plain things, but to have enough. It would be better to buy something that one could eat. And most of the boarders here earn money."

Miss Adnitt laughed again.

"You have many things to learn," she said. "Having purchased the advantage of living under Miss Meal's roof, there is not much left in most of our pockets. We go hungry for the reason that most others do the same. It's a case of poverty."

"Why do you stay, if you hate it so?"

"Money again, with a trifle of tender considerations thrown in. My mother's old pupil pays eight shillings a week for me, and thinks herself very generous to do it. I pay another eight. I've reckoned it out carefully, and I can't see that I should be any better off if I went to live elsewhere *minus* that eight shillings. She'd cut it off to a certainty if I left. And I should have offended her besides. She's the only creature in the world who cares enough about me to ask where I live or what becomes of me. I reckon she pays Miss

Meal; and I pay for what I actually have, which is little enough. And it helps you so when you begin on your own account to have just a few people who'll give you a lift for friendship's sake."

"Are your father and mother both dead?"

"I never had a father. Fathers are persons I hear of, but have never studied from the life. I'm told that I must have had one, and that the first thing he did was to die."

"Papa brought me here," said Tabitha.

"The gentleman of large private fortune?" said Miss Adnitt quizzically. Suddenly she flung back her head. "I'm glad I haven't a father," she cried, "if that's what they're made of. Do they know what a wretched place this is? If they do they ought to be whipped at the cart-tail. Don't they eat their fill every day, and more thereto? Don't they go to church every Sunday and talk nonsense about love, and doing to others as they wish to be done unto? They eat and drink, and there's a fine fuss if all is not to their liking. And all the while they must know that their daughters are getting old before their time on account of being uncared for. And if they don't know, why don't they find out? They want to govern us all and have everything their own way, and to keep all the best things for themselves; and yet they plead ignorance of the common things of everyday. It is absurd. Ah! if I only had some child, some creature, no matter what, that belonged to me and that I had to take care of, how I would care! There are some things I simply can't understand."

"We could have things to eat if we stayed at home, I suppose," said Miss Vassie.

"I haven't a home to stay in," cried the fluffy-haired student, who till then had been deep in a primer.



"While there was a home there was more than enough. Now mother's a widow, and she has more than enough to do to keep herself and the other girls. They are older, and one is ill. I never dreamed we should have to work. I'm learning at the Cookery School."

"Miss Mitchell's got a lot of brothers, and she thinks men are perfect," said Miss Adnitt. "And they pay for her here, and she has pocket-money besides. She does not go to bed hungry. And she's still a member of the private home firm; she's not yet at large, striving for herself. And then she's vowed to the purely womanly occupation of cooking, so that the men are not her competitors. It makes a lot of difference, more than you'd think offhand. And Miss Meal studies her Bible and she knows that 'to them that have shall be given.' Miss Mitchell has even once been invited to supper—a hot supper—in the realms above."

"I don't mind Miss Meal, poor old thing, so much as you do. She's had some hard times herself. She likes me, because once or twice when she has had a party I have cooked the supper, while the girl pretended to be parlourmaid. You do nothing for her, Miss Adnitt."

"Should I paint her portrait, perhaps?" said Miss Adnitt. "That would be exercising my calling for her benefit. I'd do it gladly for a consideration, spite of the fact that I'm vowed to the study of beauty." A bell rang. "That is to remind us that it is ten o'clock, and that in half-an-hour the gas will be turned off at the main. After that we burn our own candles."

"There are a great many extras," said Miss Vassie, who had been reckoning her store of money, and her chances of gaining experience by going to bed hungry. "I thought, and so did mamma, that when we had paid our bills that would be all."

"Fortunately there is a public-house opposite, and a



billiard-room, where they burn a good deal of gas," said Miss Adnitt, looking at Tabitha curiously. "They are open till no end of time at night, so we get light enough to go to bed by. We pull up our blinds, but in the dark no one can see in. It is very convenient. But to-night you have to unpack, and we had better adjourn this meeting. I share a room with Miss Mitchell. You are in the barracks with Miss Fillgrave. Till another one comes you'll be well off, as there's a place empty."

"It doesn't sound at all suitable," said Tabitha. "A billiard-room! A public-house opposite!"

Life in London was not exactly as she had pictured it. Yet she had faith in her future, a touching faith in her father and mother, who would not, she argued, have sent her to Miss Meal's, had things been as Miss Adnitt said. Was not Mr. Vassie a man, and a clever man? And did not Mrs. Vassie say she knew the world?

## CHAPTER XII

### SEEN FROM BENSCOTE AND IN LONDON

The Vassies at Benscote received a single fairly accurate account of Miss Meal's boarding-house for ladies. It was not repeated. For Mrs. Vassie frowned as she ran her eye over the letter at the breakfast-table, and as soon as she had ordered the dinner, applied herself to the painful but necessary duty of rebuking Tabitha. It was unquestionable that Tabitha had been guilty of exaggeration. No persons of consideration, no ladies of title, living in Kensington, and therefore within short walking distance of Miss Meal's house, would highly recommend a home of which such things could truly be said. These ladies, who had been acquainted with Miss Meal since her youth, would, without doubt, visit her at times, even take a lunch or tea in her house. It was not to be dreamed of that they, who must be better judges of what was proper than ignorant Tabitha, would put up with the bad food, the dirt, and the inferior company of which she complained. Girls sometimes develop the bad habit of finding fault with everything and everybody; it is one that cannot be too sternly and too promptly rebuked by those who love them best. Tabitha had not been content at Benscote; and now, when her parents had made a great effort to send her away, the first letter she wrote was of this questionable character. Mrs. Vassie did not for a moment believe that Miss Meal's house was as Tabitha described it. She did not show the letter to Mr. Vassie,

lest he should be vexed in his mind. She showed it to Mary, who said, "Dear Tabby always writes an amusing letter; I don't suppose it's so bad; things aren't. And it isn't likely."

"MY DEAR TABITHA," wrote Mrs. Vassie.

"When you were at home and so discontented, I often told you that you would not find things any better elsewhere. A girl who makes up her mind to be happy and contented is contented anywhere. You weren't much inclined to believe me then. There will be inconveniences everywhere. But if you find after all that your father and I were right in saying that home is the best place for you, you have only to come home again when your three months are ended. I think you had better stop for that time, however uncomfortable you find it."

You blame Mrs. Vassie? But I have described Miss Meal's house in Tabitha's words. I take myself to be a veracious person. And I wonder how many of my readers have not only accused me of exaggeration, but have brought their accusation forward in precisely Mrs. Vassie's formulæ?

After that Tabitha wrote every week, generally on Sundays, to "My dearest Mamma," and having told all the events of her life, so far as they sounded pleasant or probable, signed herself "Always your affect. daughter," with a renewed remembrance that nothing could or should estrange her from her family, let them do and say what they might. Mrs. Goodhurst was kind; the child was nice, always suffering, and on her back; unable to do more than a few hours of lessons or play in the morning. Mrs. Goodhurst had asked after Mr. and Mrs. Vassie; she remembered seeing them

twenty years since; she had let Tabitha stay to lunch twice; once she had given her some concert tickets. All that sounds highly probable; it is just what any average imagination might invent; and therefore Mrs. Vassie believed it, and hoped that Tabitha was learning her lesson (as she was), and that she had come to a better mind. Tabitha told no more of the meagre food at Miss Meal's; nor of the savoury suppers that the boarders smelt from afar; nor of the manners and employments of the older boarders; nor of the dirt; nor of the bug that she found running on her pin-cushion. She remembered that complaints of that sort are what school-girls indulge in; and she had left the school-girl stage of existence far behind. No second-hand news came to Benscote about Tabitha; for of all Mrs. Vassie's few friends nobody invited or visited her. Those who might have done so were chiefly concerned to preserve an attitude of strict neutrality between parents and child. And Mrs. Vassie had said in so many words that she did not wish Tabitha to be encouraged. Now that nobody did encourage her, she was inclined to make a grievance of it; and to impress Tabitha with this illustration of her lowered social position. She said that nobody approved of well-to-do girls working; and that mothers did not care to bring Tabitha, with her peculiar notions, into intimate association with their own daughters.

Meanwhile Tabitha's reasoning led her to not less absurd conclusions. She nourished for Mr. Vassie's knowledge of the world a far deeper respect than I, their biographer, am able to entertain. I excuse his faults in consideration of his ignorance. Tabitha tried to excuse them by reason of his great intellect, which, according to Mrs. Vassie, released him from subjection to the laws that rightly govern us common people.

And so it naturally followed that Tabitha thought Mr. Vassie knew without her telling what sort of discomfort and vulgarity he had left her in the midst of. A man could do such a thing only from one of two motives—either he was ignorant, as Mr. Vassie actually was, but as his daughter could not believe him to be; or he knew, and had left her there knowingly, as a trial of her strength. Nothing breaks a strong will like semi-starvation; it is a familiar fact in educational and historical treatises. Nor has it always been considered, either by educationalists or by historians, unfair to resort to such means of compulsion when others have been tried. The verdict depends on the upshot of the struggle. Nothing justifies except success. Break a child's will, and if he remains quiet till the day of his death, you may often gain praise from the peace-at-any-price party. And Tabitha knew as well as I do that never, in the whole course of his reading, had her father met with a Cause in which he believed more unwaveringly, then in his own righteousness as here opposed to the perversity of his daughter.

So Tabitha determined to show that she could endure anything only just to get her one chance. She did not bear any grudge. She was willing to see that, thinking as he did, perhaps he could not have done otherwise. Our parents hand on to us many unpremeditated gifts; I suppose Tabitha Vassie may have inherited through her father that wide sense of justice whose development he had in his own case so greatly neglected.

And if Mr. Vassie believed in his cause, Tabitha believed not less firmly in her own, the which, as in London town there were many to tell her, was indissolubly bound up with the cause of Woman. Tabitha felt, even at this early stage of her career, that any



failure or fault of hers would have wider consequences than her own life. She was working for the emancipation of Hilda, first of all; and beyond that of hundreds of other unknown girls, less able than she to stem the tide of home opposition, but seeing nearer than she the gaunt frame of Poverty beckoning through the dull fog of middle age.

The Goodhurst child was neither an exhausting nor an exacting pupil, making claim chiefly upon her teacher's pity and patience. Many long hours and great store of energy remained to Miss Vassie after she had earned the daily two and eightpence which was the price of her work. Three, four times a week there were her classes, where all her powers found employment, and sweetest among them all in exercise were the wonder and admiration that she lavished on her professors—men, probably, of no more than ordinary attainments, attracted to her side of the class-room by her fixed eyes and eager attention. Changing a gold piece out of her store, she had bought note-books far beyond the merits of such compositions, into which she copied, word for word, every night before she slept, each lecture she had listened to during the day. She took her work very seriously, knowing that if she mean to get on in a big place like London it could only be because she did better than the many other girls. If pains of hers could achieve success, she did not mean to be worsted. And what can achieve success in a great city if not good brains used to their utmost?

Furthermore, on the face of it, London is a vastly interesting place. Men and women arrive daily from the uttermost parts of the earth, and cheerfully put up with many inconveniences to which at home they are not accustomed, in order to look on the outside of its marvels. Was it surprising that Tabitha Vassie gladly

did the same? Young legs, strengthened by long tramps through the miry lanes round Benscote, swing lightly over miles of pavement; and there are endless wonders in London to be seen gratis by the knowing, not to speak of the streets, which some think are the best worth seeing of all.

Tabitha for years past had had little other mental food than that which she had got out of a heterogeneous collection of books. Now she was suddenly presented with live illustrations to all that she had read. And just as a child, crying under a sense of wrong, can be consoled by a sight of gay pictures, so Tabitha (she was only twenty-four) forgot her troubles in and out of Benscote as she looked upon that grand and most entrancing picture—London city. It was a constant delight to her to tramp along the familiar-named streets, and to remember that here this hero had fought with fate; there, in that house, a heroine whose name is a household word, had passed through her imagined existence. Perhaps even more than the literature of to-day, the English literature of twenty years ago and that of classic times, had its centre point of interest always fixed in London. There was not a writer whom Tabitha had ever dreamed of emulating but had read London like an open book, storming and vilifying sometimes; in keen affection forgetting plain faults more often; but in all cases coming back to the grimy streets and the grey stones because only under their shadow can life, to them worth calling life, be lived. And not in fiction alone, in solid fact and history, London is the starting-point for all wild adventure—the meeting place of all men who change the face of the world.

Tabitha explored the Abbey and St. Paul's, the City, the bridges, the river, the shops—all interested her

mightily. It did not even occur to her ignorance that museums must be dull; by going a mile or two out of her way from the Goodhursts' she could drop in at the British Museum, and see again the casts, the mummies or the pottery, the books or the coins; nothing came amiss. As for South Kensington, a week of evenings spent in Miss Meal's underground dining-room would convince the dullest heart of the beauties contained therein, though it would indeed have been a more enjoyable resort to a tired student had there been more chairs.

Sunday was a grand day, for then Miss Adnitt acted as guide and companion, and she was a Londoner born and bred. She knew the streets as Miss Vassie knew the ways round Benscote, finding her way though the sun was in, and through unfrequented quarters, by a sort of homing instinct. Given the price of Miss Meal's uneaten dinner for two, she could devise wonderful excursions to fill long spring days; she knew all the out-of-the-way churches, all the quiet seats, all the limits of penny fares in the 'bus or train. And come to the end of powers and pleasures, she had many unfashionable but convenient acquaintances, who, as she said, were always good for a Sunday tea for one or two.

Lady Pounsford, who had five maids and a man, must give and take long notice before entertaining Miss Adnitt to tea; and to exhaust her hospitality one visitor was enough. But there are scattered up and down London freer and happier folk who have but one maid, and send her out on Sundays, so that they are at liberty to please themselves; and to them two visitors are as one, and three better than either.

## CHAPTER XIII

### COMPANY WITH IDEAS

Miss Vassie had been in London about a month when she joined, on Miss Adnitt's introduction, a Society where women met once a week for the furtherance of each other's acquaintance, and for the discussion of matters relating to their interests. The Society rented one first-floor, a rather dull and shabby room, which, in comparison with Miss Meal's dining-room, was a centre of life and light. Among the members were a lot of young people engaged in different pursuits, brimming over with talk about themselves. To listen was better than any story-book, if you wanted to get at the facts of things. On the table were last week's papers, many in number, and of variegated colours. Flying about, even before the debate proper began, were opinions political and social different to any broached at Benscote. And on cold evenings there was a magnificent fire, lighted always a couple of hours before the time of meeting.

Many a blessing has been showered on the head of the member who paid the coal-bill in the early days when the finances of the Society were in a very shaky condition. She was a woman of some notoriety, well abused by those who were not of her party. Her name is anathema at Benscote. Yet it was she who warmed Tabitha when her own folk did nothing to prevent her being starved with cold. And by keeping Tabitha and the rest of these hard-driven girl-members warm, and



by convincing them of one rich woman's entire sympathy, she did much to soften the hardness and bitterness of heart that was carried to those Wednesday evening meetings during the winters and springs of the latter seventies. Since then much of her life has been made public to the few who cared to read; and it is now no secret that behind her public appearances lay a tragical, even a sordid story. She held what would even now be called very "advanced" opinions. She made it her chief aim in life to convert to her own mode of thought, hoping to hasten the overthrow of that social state in which she had been so ill accommodated.

She might have seen that her mode of thought is engendered most often by her mode of life. But either she did not perceive that, or else she lacked the courage to carry her convictions through. She was not apt at calculating. She could not bear to think of the girls cold and lonely, knowing what that meant. And so, some of them saw, sitting over the fire she gave them, that the world is not so bad after all, and that there are kind folk everywhere, and that these very advanced and aggressive opinions are not justified by experience. It was a noble way of losing converts to her cause. And it is by a strange perversion that Mrs. Vassie acted as an apostle of this lady's views, doing all she could to drive Tabitha into them, while the lady herself drew Tabitha towards contentment with the old ways. Even when the season of fires was past, there were round the room friendly faces, and lively ideas flying, warming to a solitary soul.

Miss Adnitt had attended the meetings since the Society's foundation. She was little interested in ideas. To her it was a gathering-ground for friends; a cheap and fairly comfortable evening resort; above



all, an admirable collection of models for pencil-sketches. It is from Miss Adnitt's sketch-book that I have drawn the impressions that make the club an actual thing to me who never was inside it. It could not have been without its effect upon the members that the President in those early days was a very beautiful woman, young still, with the kind of physique that belongs to a fine-toned voice, which carried her sentiments into the hearts of her hearers, yet lodged them there with so soft a touch that it was not until they had fixed themselves never to be moved that any one saw what impossible company they made for many old cherished faiths. Miss Adnitt shows me a sketch of her, with her strong-fingered, long hands outstretched, and her dark eyes flashing. It has been my fancy to picture her thus as she delivered a discourse of which an outline remains in Tabitha's old note-books. For Tabitha had, about that time, a notion of learning shorthand, with a view to better employment.

The debate appears to have been on woman's duty to women, though the precise form of the proposition does not remain.

"Women are women's worst enemies. If only they held together, the battle would be won. A woman is so ready to trample on another. The women who have striven will tell you that their most cruel opponents have been women, perhaps relatives or pretended friends, sometimes acknowledged foes, who, comfortable themselves, have no sympathy with misery; or uncomfortable themselves, have a strange jealousy lest any other woman should have more happiness than was allowed to them. You will hear women and girls complain, 'I was never allowed this;' 'I never had that;' 'I was never given money;' 'I was not allowed

to walk alone;' and yet in the next breath grudging these very privileges to the younger women who are in a fair way to get them. We who are grown up have not our time to come over again. We are, so I firmly believe, the worse for the foolishness and injustice in which we were some of us reared. Because that is my belief I spend much of my time trying to remedy unjust laws and customs relating to women. But our time will never come over again. Such as we are, so we shall be. To my mind my upbringing was wrong; therefore I can never use my experience as a model, but only as a warning. The lesson we women have to learn, and it is a hard one, is not to be jealous of the next generation. Some of us will have daughters. Some of us have younger sisters. All of us should have friends. They ought to do more and better than we could do. For what else do we work? What other aim have we? It is not certainly for our own immediate pleasure and luxury of living that we all of us are here, but in order that those who follow may have the good that we were denied. If we had not the privileges, neither have we the responsibility for making the best use of them. And yet we have one privilege; that of knowing what it means to suffer. With it comes the accompanying responsibility of seeing that no woman whom we can help suffers the like. Some of us know the pain and misery of hunger and extreme poverty. Knowledge, however hardly gained, is to be used for good. The harder to gain, the rarer it is, and therefore the more to be prized. Make up your minds that no woman shall ever suffer from your tyranny or your covetousness. We have learned through suffering; yet we need not fear lest, without our adding to it, there be not suffering enough left to keep the world sweet."

And then the Treasurer (she it was who bought the coals) seems to have risen to enlarge upon the perversion of the idea of obedience. She scorned some women's notion that obedience, anywhere or to anybody, obedience to laws and ordinances just or unjust, is the highest that a woman can attain to. She pointed out many instances in ancient and modern history where rebellion was the plain duty, and she does not appear to have shrunk from following these up by telling examples drawn from private life. She declared that it is more often stupidity than love of virtue that leads women to submit; more often rank cowardice than either. "We, members of this Society, are rebels against injustice meted out to women. Husbands, parents, and guardians appeal against us to the heavens above. But in all ages of the world's history tyrants have appealed to heaven in support of their rights, and have tried to brand their opponents as impious rebels, not against them only, but against the gods as well. We," so the Treasurer ended, "must go on fighting to the end, and can only hope to fall in the ranks: the war will not be ended in our time, certainly not in mine."

I remember that saying the other day when I saw an obituary notice of her in a leading daily paper. She was a stout, middle-aged woman when Miss Adnitt sketched her, with the many folds of her careworn face, and all the outward signs of the strong temper that perhaps made much of her misery, as it certainly made most of her good.

Next, taking up the word virtue, rose one "who was not aware," she said, "that the word bore different meanings, according to the sex to which it was applied. Women must teach women that to be virtuous meant to be strong, alike for men and women. Women were

taught perpetually to yield, that it was virtuous to give way, to be docile; and then if they carried out this principle to its logical conclusion, and gave way once too often in one particular, the woman was outcast, robbed of virtue, not fit to live. The want of logic in the affair was the worst. Yet she must remind her hearers that the people who prated of goodness and set the fashion in print, were but a small minority, and not a specially worthy one. They were the people who usurped more than their share of the money and goods of the community, and who used them to bring up their women in idleness, she would say in vicious idleness, for what was vicious if not such a system? Among the working classes the women had a hard time enough, yet, on account of their work, they were not so wholly dependent. And no working mother, wishful to bring up her girls well, would or could preach to them the duty of submission. She taught them rather to hold their own against all men, to have their own mind and to stick to it. Virtue, as it was dictated in well-to-do families, was merely a doctrine of expediency, a scheme to make a bad state of things bearable. She declared finally that the first duty women owe to women is to be strong."

Madame Renner illustrated and vivified this discourse by a voluble presentment of her own private griefs. It does not sound admirable. But two things I bear in mind. First, in conversion of the masses to any given belief, it has always proved an indispensable method to retail hot, burning, personal experience. Second, no rebellion has succeeded till the sufferers, describing their griefs, have kindled a sympathetic flame in the hearts of the strong.

Madame Renner, with whom this was Tabitha's first acquaintance, was a striking-looking Irishwoman, a



member of an old family, living till her girlhood in the old place, where vital energy seemed to have burned itself out. The culmination of the family sorrows lay in the birth of four girls who grew up suffering, penniless and ignorant. She had married a bad husband. She did not know what she was doing, so ignorant was she. Yet had she known, what other course was open? She had left him, yet at the first had nowhere to go to, nor any money. If only Societies had been founded years ago to help her to an opportunity of earning an honest living, her tale would have been more dignified. Society had fashioned her, then scorned her for her fashion. But bad men knew that only poverty and helpless ignorance would drive women to submit to their monstrous exactions; and therefore they stood shoulder to shoulder to resist woman's demand for a fair chance of education and work.

The Treasurer and private members applauded. Madame Renner is an attractive speaker. Tabitha listened, and because there was not a word with which she could disagree, she found herself forced to assent. Yet these truths were incompatible with many faiths concerning women in which she had been carefully brought up. Suddenly she found herself on her feet. New members were expected to say something at an early opportunity. And she felt as if, at last, some one would understand, perhaps be able to explain her difficulties, if only she could state them. "When you were married, you were married," Tabitha supposed. "But lots of women had never had a chance of marrying, however much they might wish it, and were not likely to have a chance so long as they remained at home. And that being so, was it not unfair that girls should be reproached by their mothers for their single condition, and, because they were single, pushed aside



as of no consequence? Because they'd only not done what they'd never had a chance of doing? And was it not also unfair when girls were continually told by their mothers that they'd have nothing to live upon when they got old, and yet were hindered every way when they wanted to earn? It's horrid to sit dreading poverty, and to hear about it day after day, and to do nothing. Would not even a fool's paradise be better? Boys had chances. And boys had money and allowances, however poor people were, to buy everything they wanted. It wasn't fair to say that boys were cleverer and could do more. If you set two children racing at a Sunday School treat, and gave one a long start and tied up the other's legs, it was easy to see who would get the sixpence."

Nothing very original. Yet there was a whispering among the Committee when Tabitha sat down; one questioned, another nodded; the Secretary pointed to a name in a list.

Afterwards the Treasurer came up to Tabitha.

"My dear," she said, "if you go on as you have begun you should do well. I have taken your address. I see you are at Miss Meals; I have heard of it; are you comfortable there? I think you have not many congenial companions. I see Miss Adnitt brought you. We want women to speak for our Radical Association; you should make a good speaker with some coaching and practice."

"You are very kind," said Tabitha. "But I don't know that I believe in your politics. My people have always been of the other colour. Though I should dearly like to be able to speak for the things I believe in."

The Treasurer frowned.

"You haven't yet had time to learn who are women's

friends. You may live a hundred years and die at the end in a ditch, and 'the other colour,' as you put it, will never lift a hand to help you. All the girls who have any future before them join us. They are compelled to it. You will change your mind in time. Anyway I give you one piece of congratulation and advice; speak always, as you did to-night, of the things you know and feel. Don't get up and talk about what other people feel, or what you have been told it is proper to say. To be perfectly honest is to touch all hearts that are worth touching. Here is my address: some day when you are wiser you will come to me. You seem to have made the discovery that your people have not always been wise in other matters; soon I hope you will come to that conclusion in political matters."

"What a fool you are to be sure!" said Miss Adnitt, when Tabitha on the way home recounted her adventures. "You have lost the best chance you have or will have. If she had taken you up your fortune would be assured. And your people at home, hearing her name, would have been more content. People ignore a woman's politics; they despise her help. Some day they will find their mistake and come round with a rush. These Radicals see that: they mean betimes to earmark the coming woman. They say of our Treasurer that she never makes a mistake. If she does I expect she takes care that no one knows it. And she has the wherewithal to set any one, not a perfect fool, in the way of success. You might even have done credit to my introduction."

"They are always telling us we should think for ourselves," said Miss Vassie, "and I mean to do so. I have not come out of the home frying-pan to fall in this fire. When I speak it shall be to say what I think, and not to tell out another woman's notions."

"What on earth does it matter? One sort of politics is as good as another. Politics don't last any time at all; come this year, forgotten the next. My side is the side that will get me a better chance of selling my pictures. Now pictures do last."

Tabitha did not reply. She was building fine castles in the air on the foundation of the Treasurer's praise. She had still several pounds left of her private fortune. And so much had happened outside and in her during a couple of months that if things went on at their present rate she might be on the high road to fortune in a year.

Among other things she had learned what it meant to go to bed hungry. That, as Miss Adnitt had prophesied, had deepened her insight into life, and had left her less amenable to persuasion, to the persuasion of the abiding terror of our days. She did not complain of this effect, nor of its cause. On the whole, was it a circumstance to complain of?

I have always regretted that Tabitha had not, at this time, right of entry into some home where the family relations should have served her as an example and not as a warning. She was on the way of hearing too exclusively the opinions of the women who, in an important particular, have failed. But that was a privilege that only her mother could have begged for her; and she in her curious misapprehension of the trend of thought among the women of that time, went exactly the contrary way to work. So it was. It is only worth noticing because it explains to my mind the very limited experience in matters matrimonial that I have observed in some excellent and able women, Tabitha's contemporaries.

## CHAPTER XIV

### PLEAS FOR TOLERANCE

I am torn in pieces by the conflict of my sympathies. Each time that I tell of Tabitha's efforts and troubles, I fear lest, in your indignation against her persecutors, you lose pity for Tabitha's parents, who also were passing through some affliction. Who could have dreamed, they said, that one of their carefully brought-up daughters should persist in such defiant action? Waking or sleeping, the trouble was not long off their minds. They had gone on the old lines, approved by generations of forbears; their conduct needed no justification. Whereas Tabitha, who had caused the old lines so crookedly to diverge, must justify herself by success, or more properly by submission. The parents, as they did not doubt, were entirely in the right; yet if your adversary is your own child there is not the usual comfort to be got out of that conviction. Mr. and Mrs. Vassie both belonged to types that will be common, I think, as long as the world lasts. But their particular opinions, being affairs of their age, will soon lie among metaphysical lumber, only to be disinterred at the cost of raising such clouds of dust, that the vision of him who sees must be obscured. Worn-out opinions are interpreted only by the light of the painful and elaborated sympathy of the historian, who will certainly never have historic sense enough to see the Vassie's point of view, unless he be by nature wholly unlike to them. Things seen through the best

telescope are seen plainly enough, after a fashion, yet not seen the same as by a naked eye of very ordinary pattern. And the consciousness of using an instrument to perceive what common men pass unknown, strains the mind into a position the antipodes of that occupied by everyday people like the Vassies, whose minds were not strained; and who, throughout this business, were not only incapable of seeing from the opposite point of view, but were firmly convinced that there was no other point of view than their own for persons desirous of serving God.

I do not say this in their dispraise; for, though I encounter hereby the scorn of some fashionable philosophers, I declare that I believe it a better habit for stupid persons to concentrate their force than to diffuse it. I have observed that ever such a narrow runlet of water may be useful in some place, if only it is confined to a bed that it can fill, and along which it may move in the direction of some humble business.

It is easy to say that they were narrow and intolerant. Perhaps if they had both been taken in hand early by a vigorous partner the stream of life might have been widened till it covered a broad bed. But then there would have been no Tabitha Vassie, for Tabitha was a family name on her mother's side of the house. They were what they were; I might go behind the Creation to account for all things as I find them. And being so, the question is whether they would have done their duty better if they had allowed their thoughts and beliefs to meander over a wider surface, and in uncertain channels. Mr. Vassie was, I think, as good a Christian as a lazy man may be. Mrs. Vassie, I am sure, did her duty as she saw it. And the whole course of this story turns upon that devotion to perceived duty which Tabitha carried with her from home.



After all, I am the last person who should find grave fault with Tabitha's parents. There must be some persons to continue the world on the old lines until we, who think we know so well how to do it, have laid down the new lines whereon the world is to travel. The traffic of the world cannot be stopped until the new line is complete; and the public, upon whose favour each new line depends for success, wisely demands to know the precise position of the new terminus. Any monopoly, especially in modes of thought, is to the disadvantage of the community. Experience proves every day that where there is no competition for public favour, no continuous effort is made to adjust concerns to the public convenience. Upon those who seek to break up old monopolies rests the burden of proof that they have better schemes to promote. In the old days there was a monopoly of thought about women, their place and their duty. Outsiders dared not come into competition. All who thought, thought alike. English homes and English women were a beacon to benighted nations and times, were perfect so long as they remained unchanged and together. It is the monopoly that is objectionable, not this or that opinion or individual holding it. But there are those who passionately desire to sweep away all the old monopolies only in order to claim a fresh monopoly for themselves and their own little clique.

Mr. Vassie was one of those who say that if you believe a thing, you believe it to be right and true; and that if your opinion be right and true, the contrary opinion must be wicked and false. In a certain stage of growth that argument appears unanswerable. And therefore not about women alone did he hold<sup>1</sup> exclusively to his own opinions. He knew that his political party was in the right, and he voted straight when an

election came, so unerringly straight indeed that he missed even the excitement of being asked by the agent for his vote, or of hearing by what new arguments his old convictions were this time to be supported. He was sure that those who differed from him in religious matters had not a leg to stand upon. And as for Tabitha and other such girls, he never supposed that they could sustain a reasonable argument on their case for a stretch of ten minutes.

Work, indeed! His Bible taught him that work was a universal curse; lifted, as he was taught by experience, partially and in a few cases, by the possession of money. He lived tranquil, speaking of firm faith and a gospel of peace, and not exciting himself about any man's conversion. But was it possible that a daughter of his should remain unconverted, even if no action was taken?

As for Mrs. Vassie, theories were even less, and indolence of body not at all in her line. She found the reason of her being in her husband, in marriage, and in the birth of children; these were her specialty, and like all specialists she showed a tendency to minimize those things in life that lay outside her province. To be sure, the material is wanting to put the finishing-touch to what I may call the exclusively matrimonial scheme of life; and there is also lack of material for the extension to all men of Mr. Vassie's leisurely paradise. Logical, they were not. But heaven help the world if our mothers visit us with severe logic!

And justification for the matrimonial scheme of life was showing itself at Benscote. Mr. Fewell, who had come lately to Ransham, the one well-to-do bachelor in a radius of six miles, paid four visits at Benscote, and each time he found something to say to Mary. Twice he met the girls coming home from the station with the

books, and turned to walk with them. Once he called to say that he was going to London, and had the ladies any commission? Once there was not even that pretext. Furthermore, Geoffrey, home for his *exeat*, was invited to Ransham Lodge and was given a mount.

It is so pleasant when events travel steadily along the road where you would naturally look for them, and when things come about in their natural order.

It was only to be expected that Mr. Fewell should ask Mary about the members of the family whom he had not seen. "Three elder ones, and Miss Hilda, four? You can hardly call my friend Miss Ada here an elder one? Have you a married sister then?"

"I'm grown-up, too, now," said Ada, settling herself in front of Mr. Fewell.

"Not married; no;" said Mary. "But Tabby was not contented at home. She always wanted to work. She is in London."

"A strong-minded woman?" said Mr. Fewell, glancing round the group. "I should not have expected that here. You all look so very happy and contented."

"I'm sure I'm thankful enough to be out of the school-room and to be done with disagreeable things like work," said Ada, tossing her small head. "I suppose I'm not strong-minded or I shouldn't say so."

"Dear old Tabby's different to the rest of us," said Mary. "She's very clever for one thing." And she looked at her mother, wondering how far she ought to go in explanation.

"I'm bound to say that it was entirely against my husband's and my wish," said Mrs. Vassie, firmly, for she felt that the future of a daughter might depend upon her immediate action. "But girls now-a-days think they know best. I am thankful to say that we are well able to keep all our girls at home, and I hope Tabitha,

at no distant time, will come home to us again. She is with friends who have a delicate child, and is a great comfort to them. Of course if we had been in needy circumstances, it would be a comfort to us also to know she was provided for."

"Quite so," said Mr. Fewell, nodding his head. "Quite so. I entirely agree. In the present overstocked state of the labour market, Mrs. Vassie, it is most undesirable for those to compete for work who are not compelled to do so by stress of poverty."

Mr. Fewell's attentions quickened after that. And when the long holidays came he not only had a horse for Geoffrey, but also a stout pony that could carry a lady safely; and he was most kind in taking Ada out. When Geoffrey was at home she at once dropped her young-ladyhood to become his school-girl companion, so that she could go out in a sort of made-up costume, not a proper riding-habit. Mrs. Vassie decided that it was scarcely worth while for Mary to buy a riding-habit, which is an expensive thing if it is good, since this episode of the riding parties might not last long. And Mr. Fewell always came home with the children, and almost always stayed to tea. Letters to Tabitha were full of him. He was such a kind man. He had such a nice house. His housekeeper was such a queer old dear. He came so often. He was so generous. When Geoffrey's and Ada's birthday fell together he had given them both such beautiful presents. And one day he brought Mary a book.

Mary's future looked certainly much more inviting than Tabitha's.

## CHAPTER XV

### A WEDDING

Tabitha's little pupil was to go for a month to the seaside. And in the summer-time there are no classes. And Miss Meal's house was to be shut for a while. Therefore Tabitha took a holiday, and went home to Benscote. She had lived hardly for the last weeks, possessed by the dread that she might find herself at Benscote without means to carry her back to work; and at Benscote she exaggerated her wealth, which amounted to no more than a very few pounds, for fear that her line of retreat might be forcibly cut off. For Benscote did not seem to her at all more attractive as a place of residence now that she had taken her opportunity of contrasting its comforts with some hardship. To be sure it is pleasant to rest, and surprisingly agreeable to eat a plain dinner if it does not come as a matter of course. But rest and food play a larger part in existence than in life; and to tell the truth, Tabitha was a little bit ashamed of herself when she found herself enjoying her food; such enjoyment seemed to her incompatible with the high ideals she set before her.

More than ever she stood outside the family interests, and the family stood apart from hers. The sisters said she had contracted a tiresome habit of "wool-gathering." When she tried to tell them about the Society and its debates, Bella cried, "Fancy Tabby's speaking in public! Didn't you feel nervous? How did you



stand? Or did you sit? I'm sure I should be thinking all the time that they were making fun of me; or that I'd got a smut on my nose, or something of that kind."

And Mary observed, "I'm sure I should find nothing to say. It seems to me people did very well before there were societies and clubs; and I can't think why they want to begin."

Then Tabitha began eagerly to explain why they wanted to begin.

Mary was cutting a child's dress out of a minimum of stuff, and observed, with her head o' one side and the scissors gaping open, "I can't think why people aren't contented; it's much better here and more comfortable than it can be in London. And if you needn't work—"

"Better for us, for you, perhaps!" cried Tabitha. "But think of all the women who are miserable! If we do nothing because we are comfortable, things will never improve."

"Do you know that's what I call unreasonable?" said Mary, smiling, for she had just hit upon a satisfactory way out of the dress difficulty. "You say that you haven't anything to make you miserable of your own, and so instead of sitting down to be thankful, you must needs search about to find out miseries of other people's. I can't see the sense of that; I can't indeed. And it isn't even as if you could do any good."

"I might do good," said Tabitha. "Who can tell who does do good? I want to leave the world a little better than I found it. What's the good of living else? Anyhow I want to see how the world really is."

"I'm sure I don't flatter myself that the world's any better for me," said Mary, fitting the bits of her dress together with a triumphant air. "I haven't such a good opinion of myself."

"It's all very well to talk now about doing good, Tabby," said Bella; "but you never liked being at home, you know you didn't. And you confess you've gone because you want to see things. Of course if you'd been very happy at home, and had gone away on purpose to do good, like missionaries do, and people of that sort, it would be different. As for me, I don't care to be at home always either; it's very dull, especially in the winter; but I don't pretend that I want to do any good to anybody except myself."

"I like this neighbourhood and the country," said Mary. "I hope I shall stay here all my life."

"Come along, Tabby," cried Hilda. "Let's go down the village for a walk. What's the good of talking? You'll never agree."

And as soon as Tabitha was gone to fetch her hat she said, stormily, "Tabby's the stuff heroines are made of, and if the world's no better for her I'll never believe in the world again. She'll do something grand before she's done, depend upon it."

"They always say heroes and heroines are very uncomfortable sort of people to live with," said Bella.

"We're not all called to be heroines," said Mary, quietly stitching her frock.

"I'm called to play tennis," said Bella. "The last time I played against Mr. Fewell and Ada they nearly beat me. They play so well together. She takes most of the balls. He admires."

"He is very kind to Ada," said Mary, blushing. "I think he is kind to everybody."

"Mary," said Mrs. Vassie, coming into the room to find Mary alone, "Mr. Fewell is down-stairs on the lawn with Bella and Ada. He has been with papa in the study for some time. He came to say; he came to

ask papa's permission to—to—in fact it appears he is very much attached to our little Ada."

There was a pause. "I came to tell you at once," said Mrs. Vassie. "I came to you first, directly. For you have always been such a comfort to me, my dear child; I don't know what I should do without you, my dear eldest child."

"I always thought that's how it would be," said Mary quietly. "He has always taken so much notice of Ada. I think he is very nice; and kind."

Even Mrs. Vassie was puzzled. Uncomplaining submission to the fate ordained by their elders was the lesson she had taught to her girls since their babyhood; yet she was astonished to find it so well learned. Or possibly Mary did not care? Had she really foreseen this?

"Ada is very young. I could have wished that she might not have had an affair of the kind till she was older, till she was twenty, say. I was twenty when I married your father."

"But I think she likes him," said Mary. "And it would be a good thing to get one of us comfortably married and settled. And he has a nice house and it is near. And Mr. Fewell is very kind, and gets on very well with papa. I wish Bella would marry. Perhaps she will if one of us begins. They say one wedding in a family often brings another."

"Yes, my dear. Yes, my dear. But there is a great disparity of age," said Mrs. Vassie, startled to hear this echo of her own common-sensible, middle-aged views.

"You couldn't have Ada marry a boy of her own age," said Mary, smiling. Then she went down-stairs to congratulate the pair.

Mr. Fewell was quite unconscious of the family forecast. "I felt I had your goodwill, Mary," he said.

"You have always been my friend, and a kind of mother to the children."

"And I'm sure we shall always be friends," said Mary cheerfully. "You see, so many of us as there are, the eldest at home must always feel a good deal older." She turned to Ada, smiling, "Mr. Fewell is a very fortunate man."

And Ada flushed and bridled, and turned round and round the ring that had been for just half-an-hour on her plump finger.

When Tabitha came back from her walk she was more hopelessly outside the family interests than before.

"Is this the way that a man can pick and choose, and fling his handkerchief to anyone he pleases? Last week I know mamma as good as said he was in love with Mary; now Ada is puffed up like a little pouter pigeon at the prospect of marrying him. And Mary doesn't seem to care. Not but what I'd die sooner than let the man know I was disappointed. I don't like him. I never did. I hate men with such smooth, shiny hair."

"There's no love lost between you," said Hilda slyly. "I saw him put his hand on Ada's arm and draw her away. She's his property now. You might contaminate her, you know; teach her strong-minded ways. As for Mary, she's a brick. And I wonder at you, Tabby, who have such a genius for pretending to enjoy things you can't; I wonder that you're not ready to shake hands with your sister, who is a heroine, after her quiet fashion. I hope the wedding'll be soon, for there'll be no bearing Ada. She's been bad enough ever since Mr. Fewell took to noticing her, and before we ever dreamed it could come to this."

"I don't know," said Tabitha. "I expect she's

happier now than afterwards. Lots of women are," she added sagely. "I shouldn't be in a hurry."

Next day Ada and Mrs. Vassie went to Ransham to see the house, and to make plans for a speedy wedding. And by the end of the week congratulations were pouring in by every post. "It must be *such* a comfort to you to have one of your daughters comfortably settled at last." "From what you tell me, Ada is a *very* lucky young woman, to draw such a prize so *early*." "It does indeed seem as if it were *everything* that you can desire." "Not often is one able to offer such *unmixed* congratulations."

We all know the kind of thing that we write to our friends on such occasions, casting about in our minds for the happiest turn of phrase, and not too nice in stating what we take to be the naked truth. But Tabitha, who was young, and a sworn foe to diplomacy in daily life, chose to excite herself because Mrs. Vassie and Ada read these compliments simply, and in the light of their friends' approval, stepped the one backwards, the other forwards, into the prime of life. Mrs. Vassie looked younger than Mary. And Ada put on finished airs that sat on her with a pretty quaintness.

"You see, Tabitha," said Mrs. Vassie brightly, "you were so very anxious to take your own way and to go away from home; but if you had only had patience and waited, things would have righted themselves. Some of the girls in a family marry, and as your father and I get older, we need some of our daughters at home."

"I'm sure the last thing I should wish is to stay at home in order to marry Ernest Fewell," said Tabitha.

"My dear! Don't even suggest such a thing. Ernest is more than satisfied with his little Ada, as I



am sure he has every right to be. But, of course, all girls like to be married and have a home of their own; it's only natural."

"I like to have a home of my own, and leave to begin at my own end of my crust," said Tabitha.

Then the presents came pouring in. In a week Ada had accumulated a greater stock of personal possessions than Tabitha had gathered in a lifetime.

"Girls like to be married, of course," said Tabitha; "but for the sake of what they get, not to be married for marrying's sake."

"Married for marrying's sake!" said Mrs. Vassie. "My dear child, you don't know what you are talking about. I should be sorry to think you did. Of course every girl likes her friends' good wishes. And if a girl were not pleased with such beautiful presents as Ada had received, it would be very hard indeed to please her."

Tabitha was allowed to go back to London before the wedding. If she took that view of things, she would not add to the gaiety of the family. And she, calculating narrowly, saw that to buy a wedding outfit would leave her penniless to begin her work. She had already contributed a sovereign towards the purchase of a travelling-bag for Ada, who was to spend her honeymoon in Switzerland, and who had already arranged to travel every year, and to see the world that her husband had seen in the far-away days when he was young. And as Mrs. Vassie said—"It was nice of the sisters to give something that would last, and that looked well among all the other presents."

"Ada's done her hair all these years with a quite common kind of brush," said Hilda. "And it always looks very nice. Why does she suddenly begin to want all this grand paraphernalia?"

"For the wife of a man in Mr. Fewell's position it is quite suitable," explained Mrs. Vassie, who had nevertheless lived half-a-century without desire for trifles of the kind. "One can't go into these sort of things, my dear Hilda. We can't have life without any poetry at all. And I'm sure it is a very handsome present of your cousin's."

"It would be more to the purpose if they'd give something to Tabby, who wants it, instead of Ada, who doesn't, and never will. I'm pretty sure Tabby half starves herself, aunt. She'd much better have kept her money for herself, and I told her so, instead of spending it on rubbish like a bag, that's no real good."

"I hope I shall never see one of my girls selfishly spending her money on herself. Even if it's only a pretty present, it's a much better habit to get into to spend on others rather than oneself. I like to see girls free-handed and liberal."

Hilda's present made a poor show among the rest. "Just a cheap little thing; but Hilda never liked me," said Ada, turning it over.

There were at the wedding many new relations, brought in by Mr. Fewell. And without wishing to use such an occasion to show off, it would have been easy to call attention to Hilda's independent fortune, had she made a more worthy present. One wedding often brings another, and though a good man does not marry for money, any man may be unable to marry without it. At weddings family affairs are discussed among those who have hitherto been strangers, and sometimes a new train of thought and action may be advantageously started.

"Tabitha? My other daughter?" said Mrs. Vassie, as she bustled about among the guests. "She is in

London. My friend Mrs. Goodhurst is away, and so my daughter cannot be spared. The little girl is extremely delicate, and Tabitha is so entirely to be depended upon. And Mrs. Goodhurst has no elder daughter, only this one sickly child, poor thing! I've known her slightly since we were girls, and so, when she asked me for Tabitha, I did not think it right to refuse, though it is against my feeling and my husband's to allow girls to go out into the world as a rule. Better for girls to have something to do? You think so? Well, perhaps so. I dare say there are advantages, and girls will be girls. It has disappointed us all, of course. But the child has been ailing this summer, and a sick child must always come before self-pleasing. And Tabitha feels her duty so very strongly. I hope all my girls do, for there is nothing else that makes a home happy."

## CHAPTER XVI

### A NEW ACQUAINTANCE

Early in the New Year Tabitha's little pupil died. Here was her sole source of income swept suddenly away. She stood at turning-points, and might have gone back to Benscote, there to live ever after, as Mrs. Vassie suggested; or might forge for herself a fresh way through the crowds of London. Already at Christmas she had entered her name and paid her fee at the classes; she was always the first student to do that; then she felt chained and anchored for another term to the life she loved best.

Sitting humbly, an insignificant member on a back seat, in the Society's upper chamber, the chair being occupied by Miss Agnes Sawday, sister to the land-agent, Miss Vassie noticed that the chair was treated with great deference by the Committee, among whom was at least one titled person. They differed on some point of order, and it was Miss Sawday whose opinion triumphed. After the meeting she came up to Tabitha.

"I heard you were in town, when I was home last," she said. "But I did not know where. However, I thought we should run across each other, for the London that belongs to us working women is as yet a small place. We meet the same persons again and again. And then our Treasurer spoke of a Miss Vassie; she was struck with your maiden speech last spring; and not less, I fancy, with your independence. She has watched you since. I dare say you are like me, too busy to come to this place often."

"I have no business," said Miss Vassie. "I want above all things something to do; not teaching if I can help it. I am only a student yet."

Miss Sawday hesitated, looking Tabitha up and down; then she said, "We should be friends, hailing from the same village. Will you come and see me? I am always at home on Thursdays after four. Come next Thursday if you have nothing better to do. I want to hear whether you like London, and the latest news from Benscote. I was abroad through the holidays, and there is no chance of talking here. The woman is shutting up."

"I shall be very pleased to come," said Tabitha, wondering what her sisters would say if she told them she felt flattered by an invitation from Miss Agnes Sawday. But London was beginning to show itself hard; time and money were slipping away; and she did not intend to go back to Benscote if she could help it.

"Miss Sawday?" said Miss Adnitt, who was consulted. "Agnes Sawday? She is a personage in her way. She has one of the largest and newest schools near town. She is on the Committee, and she can speak, so that her views are always set forth to the best advantage. Go? Of course. I wish she had asked me. If you don't get to know everybody, how should you get on? A land-agent's daughter? What of that? If I had belonged to the land I might now be churning butter, and happier. Who knows? I run, as it is, in the family groove. I inherit the tendency to paint. She's influential; more likely to get you work than most."

If Tabitha had needed further persuasion she found it in reckoning her accounts. At her present rate of expenditure she would scarcely last out three months. Mrs. Goodhurst had paid her quarter's salary in lieu of



notice, but beyond that there was nothing. She must at once find something to do, and an income. Besides what would be owing to Miss Meal, she had but £2 19s. in the world. Imagine two pounds nineteen standing alone between you and the wreck of your career! Tabitha knew that if she went home now she would never get away again. She would be told that she had had her chance and lost it; which would be true enough, and nothing need be said as to the smallness of the chance; for the successful persons in the world's history are those who have succeeded each with his own chance, and never with another man's. All the work that has been worth doing has been done in spite of odds.

So she presented herself at Miss Sawday's house at four o'clock sharp next Thursday. She had come straight from a lecture, and other women were there, better dressed and more at ease. Miss Sawday welcomed her, then found her a place in a corner, where she drank a cup of tea and looked about. Perhaps Miss Sawday, who is a perceiving woman, was not sorry that it should be told at Benscote that she lived in some comfort and amid some consideration.

The house was furnished in a style that is now common, just what we should expect from one who follows the fashion of her clique, and aims at being sharper-sensed than the majority; then it was counted original to prefer old things to new ones, dull to flaring colours, dark wood to gilding. There were books too; not illustrated gift-books, set round in equi-distant heaps on the table, but such as one might take up to read; new books that had cost money, books with the Mudie label on them, and some of the month's magazines. Tabitha had not connected such amenities with the Sawdays; she felt a little shock to her social creed. In social depths Tabitha had not yet touched bottom;

she had only sounded deep enough to be sure that society is not as it had seemed away in Benscote. Then the other visitors went away, and Miss Sawday turned to Tabitha.

"Now we can talk. How is everybody at Benscote? You know my mother is not much of a letter-writer; her sight is less good than it was. And brothers never tell us women what we want to know. Your mother and sisters? I know them all so well by sight. In the old days when on summer Sundays we went out to Benscote church, I used to watch you all in your pew. I remember admiring extremely a pink silk bonnet that you once wore; I thought it would be the height of bliss to have such a one. Now pink silk bonnets are attainable, but are unaccompanied by any great delight. Such is life! How could we ever have thought such a thing pretty!"

"I remember that bonnet too," said Tabitha, only half appreciating the hostess' tact in speaking of affairs where the guest had played the greater part.

"I was so surprised to hear you had come to London. And what do your people say to your success?" said Miss Sawday, who knew the whole history of the affair. "Strange that there should be two of us from that tiny district, and that we should never have known one another before. One looks on Benscote as a place where the centuries roll over, leaving no mark."

"My people did not want me to come. They do not wish me to succeed. They hope I shall be content to go home again to the old life. Earned money is, for a girl, disgraceful, more or less. They did just as little as they could to help me. Why not? They wanted me to fail; they tried to make me do it. It is logical. Perhaps it will answer."

"Logical, indeed!" said Miss Sawday. "I'm a woman,

and there are qualities I admire off hand more than logic." She knew as much as a neighbour may know of the Vassie financial condition, and her rejoinder was not cordial. "And will you be content with the old life?"

"I hope not; indeed, I hope not," said Tabitha eagerly. "But I must if I can't get something to do. You see I do not agree with them that it would be better. Four at home is too many. And I do not mind how hard I work, nor what I do, if only I may stay on with a chance of succeeding in the end. Still, one can't stay without money, and I am earning none. And there are so many of us at home, and boys need so much; you understand. Surely I must be worth just my keep to somebody, while I learn some more, till I can do something really well!"

"I wonder," said Miss Sawday, "I wonder if the secretaryship at the new club for women would be at all in your line? The Madeline club; it has actually grown out of our Society. The pay is poor, only forty pounds a year, and the hours are long. Still, there it is, and it sounds fairly well. Your people could not object to that, if they will let you stay in London at all. And if you are determined, you will find time or make it to study outside, and fit yourself for something better. Time can be made if not found."

"How shall I thank you? I will live gladly on the edge of a sixpence if only I need not go home."

"You have not got it yet. And you might not like it if you did."

"Of course I like it. Wouldn't everybody in my place? I like work. Above all I like to feel that there's something ahead, beyond growing older and stupider every year. Women who stay at home, old maids who stay at home, are only tolerated after they are thirty. Everything they're set to do could be done

better by a young girl who likes to run errands all day, just to exercise her legs. Excuses are made for them, and they're hustled about to fill up odd corners; even the pity is akin to contempt and not to love. And pity from the people you have to live with day after day is a present you soon get surfeited with. Is it so very wrong to want to be independent? It's what they try to teach boys to feel, and sometimes the boys won't. And what is undeniably right in boys and men can't be exactly a wickedness in girls and women."

"It's difficult to avoid starving oneself if there's a position to keep up on forty pounds a year," said Miss Sawday, ignoring the moral question.

"I don't mind that," said Tabitha. "I don't indeed. It's surprising what a little one can do upon when one tries. You're young, and strong, you know. And most people must eat and drink a great deal more than does them any good."

"Some women eat and drink less than does them any good," said Miss Sawday, nodding her head. "You're compounding for the sins you're inclined too. Don't forget that you have not your own reputation alone to keep unsmirched. Each one of us is taken as an example of the general stock. Physically and morally, whatever we do that is wrong is credited to the sex; I wish I could be sure that all our virtues are multiplied in the same fashion."

"I know that," said Tabitha. "That is one of the things I have learned since I left home. It's hard to be always wise, when everyone is waiting to catch you out in a fault, and on only forty pounds a year. And one cares so little for eating. And one must be tidy to look at; if one isn't they say that women who work are all hideous and lazy."

"They say many things," said Miss Sawday.



"But if we lead in the right direction we shall win justice, or some justice, for those who follow. Meanwhile, for my part, I think the first thing we've got to learn is to spend our money to good advantage. It is not where women have shone hitherto. They must not go in debt. They must not go untidy. They must not starve beyond what is compatible with a moderate degree of health. And they can scarcely earn enough to pay for all these things."

"If we had our share of money we should be all right," said Tabitha. "It is so hard that we who would work are not given even teachers, and the boys, even when they won't work, are given everything that money can buy."

"Yes; it's hard," said Miss Sawday, thinking she would hear more of her visitor's finances. "It's hard, but it has to be so, I suppose, as things are."

"Must it? I suppose it must," said Tabitha, with a sigh, mentally adding to Miss Sawday's speech all the arguments that she had heard so often at Benscote. "You think so too? I hoped you would see my side. Nobody does. I can't see there must be so much difference. When my brothers go away they have everything they want; they cost a hundred or two hundred a year. And when they come home for the holidays they have money to spend and go where they will. And they've only to ask for something that costs ten or twenty pounds, and get it. And I had saved just two pounds when I came away. It took a long time as we've scarcely anything; and Hilda gave me five pounds, and that was all I had; I've spent most of it on 'buses and lunches, and it's nearly all gone; and yet they say I've cost such a lot. And we have to get our lunch out. Miss Meal is not supposed to give us dinner, and one can't go



from breakfast to tea without something, because the tea's not very much. I allow myself fourpence or fivepence for lunch; it's not much."

"There are plenty of places where you can get enough to eat for fourpence or fivepence."

"But not the sort of places where I could go to. Mamma would not like it. They're for quite common persons."

"Gentility is an expensive luxury."

"Yes. But I have so often to do things that mamma doesn't like, because she likes me to do things that cost more than I have, and they won't give me the money. So when it's only a case of going without something to eat, I try to please her."

"And starve? To starve a human being, even if it be yourself, is a sin. How long will that last?"

"I don't starve. I can do as much work, and as good work as the rest. What can I do? They didn't want me to come to London at all; but I came. I thought it right; the least I can do is to give way and please them when it is only to go hungry."

"But you don't mean to say that it does please your mother that you should starve."

"Oh, no!" said Tabitha hastily. "Certainly not. They wish me to have everything that is proper; they say so always. But I haven't got the money to pay for it, and they don't give me money; perhaps they can't while the boys are so expensive. I've told mamma a good deal; but she doesn't understand. You see, she has always lived there, and at home there is, of course, always plenty to eat. And papa knows about boys; but he thinks women don't need to have money; he says so often."

"The power of the purse is the one thing that men like to keep for themselves," said Miss Sawday. "In

my experience they'd sooner their women had anything than an independent income."

"Of course ladies hardly ever have any money of their own, not even if they are married," said Tabitha. "They can only buy things. That's one reason why I shouldn't like to be married."

"Ladies?" said Miss Sawday. "Is that your experience? Perhaps my dear old mother does not belong to the people you call ladies? She always had money of her own. She worked for it, and she had it. But Lady Molland and Mrs. Gerald Tyddesley too; they are on our committee; they have a banking account of their own. Middle-class people, chiefly commercial people, who since this century have thought all England was made for their men to heap money in; they keep their women penniless in the midst of plenty. All I know is that my dear old mother gave me ten pounds of her own, her very own, that she had saved, when I began life on my own account."

"Mamma has nothing to give," said Tabitha. "It is different."

"Women of our class have never been drones," said Miss Sawday, with some spirit. "We always work; the only question is at what? I'm not of a marrying sort. And then I should be out of place on a farm, or married to a tradesman. I am a fish out water in that set."

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have told you so much," said Tabitha stiffly. She was not pleased to be reminded that Mrs. Vassie stood in the middle, between Lady Molland and Mrs. Sawday, as near to one as to the other. At Benscote it was the custom to consider every inch of the ground to be covered before you came to Ransham High Street; and on the other side, between Benscote Manor and Combe Castle, where

Lady Molland's brother-in-law lives, to jump the whole distance at a single bound, saying that "no one can be more than a gentlewoman." This saying, according to the conventionality in which Tabitha had been reared, disposed of the whole matter. But it did not describe the whole range of fact, nor of her personal feelings, when she, shabby, ill-fed, shy, sat beside Lady Molland at a Society debate.

"Have you told me anything?" said Miss Sawday. "You have only told me a little about your money affairs, in order that we may see if this secretaryship cannot be managed. And you have told me what your family think it right to do. If they did not think it right, they would do otherwise, of course. Thinking it right, there can be no secrecy in the matter. They wouldn't do what they are ashamed to have known. Everybody knows that you have a brother at Oxford, also what Oxford and the big schools cost. We have guessed that you have some trouble to make two ends meet; many women have, for that matter. We put two and two together. I think you have only tried to put the arguments for that side of the case that I am unable to take. And now," said Miss Sawday, in a brisk tone, "suppose you get this work at the Madeleine, you'll have to live nearer to it. Why not give Miss Meal provisional notice at once? Besides the distance, it is not the place for our club secretary to live."

"Miss Adnitt is just about to move; she wants me to live in the same block. Built for workmen's dwellings, you know them; now they're all let to ladies. On paper it doesn't come cheaper than Miss Meal's; but if I catered for myself I should buy food I could eat, and if I went without food I should keep the money; at Miss Meal's we have to pay and yet go hungry."

"Rather solitary alone in two rooms, wouldn't it be?"

"Solitary? You can have no idea of the sort of persons who live at Miss Meal's, if you think it possible to miss them except with joy."

"And your people like you to stay there?"

"They don't know. I've told them, but they don't take it in. They heard of Miss Meal. Some well-known people gave her their names. If they really understood what the place is, they'd have to acknowledge that they were wrong, that they didn't know the world, and they're always saying they do. Mamma has scarcely been away from Benscote. Papa lives in his study all day, shut up with books. It's the thing to speak as if men, because they are men, know the world. But do they really know? The bad ones know about wickedness, I suppose; but what good's that if they've got to advise a good sort of woman? And the good ones seem to me to know nothing, at least nearly nothing, when you come to find out."

"You've gleaned a poor opinion of the sex," said Miss Sawday, laughing. "Perhaps there's something in what you say."

"Don't you see," cried Tabitha, passionately, "that I'm on the horns of a dilemma? When I first came to London I thought they knew about things. And so I put up with everything, for we had to see whose endurance was longer. I'm not to be vanquished that way. One can but die, and I've wished to die often at Benscote, though never now. 'How can one die better than facing fearful odds?' You'll think it silly, but that's what I used to say to myself. And mamma taught us that piece of poetry too. That is *if they'd known*. But they don't know, and I can't make them understand; there's no peg to hang it on. When I've tried to tell they go off on a side issue, or talk about



my coming home again to play tennis for a business, and keep fowls for a pastime. Mamma says she doesn't understand. She said the other day that she'd no experience when she married; and sitting down ever since at Benscote, she can't have got much in the things that concern me. Besides, they wouldn't do as they do if they knew. They don't mean to be cruel. They're fond of me in their way. If ever I make a success of myself they'll be proud, and will fancy they had a share in it. So they had, I suppose. For the more you endure, if you come out at the other end, the harder you are, and the more you can do. Only now I know they're ignorant, how can I follow their advice? I can't even ask it unless by pretending, and that's what I've never done. No good ever comes of playing a part; so I'm on the horns of my dilemma; and they are in the same plight. For if they're to be pardoned because they didn't know any better, they can't the next minute, when it suits the purpose, presume on a store of wisdom."

"Poor child," said Miss Sawday. "One does not come to those conclusions without paying their price. But let us go on with the practical part of the matter. Do you think you can afford this flat?"

"They're only two tiny rooms. The worst is they're not furnished. But I could do with very little. And once in I should be better off than ever I've been before. There's a woman does for you if you pay her; and Hilda will come soon."

"Your people will help you with a thing like that. They'll make friends some time; this is an opportunity. Ask them for a ten-pound note or so; that will do wonders with care. Tell them about the secretaryship; remind them that Lady Molland's on the Committee; and Lady Hurstpierpoint. It is a modest



request. And the worst of your troubles will then be over."

Tabitha walked home to Brompton rejoicing. Hilda's twenty-first birthday would be here in a few months. And after that great event, would not the two cousins storm the world, hand in hand? Such a happy world as it was that night!

Very absurd, no doubt. For in sober truth girls do not storm the world from such vantage-ground. And yet the courage of life comes from hope. And we should none of us have courage even to do the possible did we not nourish our hearts on strong hope of the impossible. The heart of the young makes its own happiness out of a future whose colours fade as it melts into a grey present.

Even the stale bread and the dry cheese laid on Miss Meal's soiled tablecloth tasted good; for what do the wise among us demand of food, save strength enough to live well while we eat it, and to look bravely ahead the moment after?

And the company annoyed her less than often; she began to see that women are what they are because they have had little chance of being anything better. After all, if women now were perfect, and their condition not to be improved, what need for Tabitha Vassie and the rest to fight or to suffer in the endeavour to smooth the path for those that come after?

Presently, in Miss Meal's top attic, behind the dirty check cotton curtain, a heroine rested from her labours, one who saw what it might be to live and to die, to strive and to suffer for unnamed multitudes, in need of help.

If only they could have realized this at Benscote! And yet it is never found that our opponents, be they who they may, are better pleased with us when they

are convinced that we identify them, after ever so roundabout fashion, with the powers of evil: were things so, martyrs to any faith would be few and far between. And for my part, I always bear in mind that the worst service any one can do to a cause is to deprive its votaries of a chance of stiffening themselves by suffering for the faith that is in them.

## CHAPTER XVII

### A QUESTION OF TEN POUNDS

"Your daughter Tabitha is very headstrong, my dear," said Mr. Vassie testily to his wife. She had brought Tabitha's letter into the study, and now stood beside her husband's desk while he read it. Our minds are governed by posture and association; so that he who sits always acts as a judge, while he who stands is apt to feel like a culprit. Mrs. as well as Mr. Vassie considered their respective postures suitable.

"She seems to say," said Mrs. Vassie, "that Miss Meal's boarding-house is really a very undesirable place."

"Why did she not make this clear before, and not make the most of it now because she has taken into her head that she wants to go and live elsewhere? She was at home at Christmas-time. I am always here in the study. She knows where to find me. Why did she not come and say to me (I'm the proper person to decide) she had not proper food, and that her companions were not in her own position? And she has been there nearly a year; there was plenty of time to speak."

"She did say something about the food not being very good, and that she could not make friends with the other boarders," said Mrs. Vassie. "Just at first, but not since. And Tabitha's never very ready to make friends. There are a good many people about here that she pretends she does not like."

"She may have told you; she has not told me," said Mr. Vassie reproachfully, as if he had brought his daughters up in the habit of complete confidence, which they, for some sudden reason, deserted. "I know nothing about this."

"There were always her letters. I've kept none from you; I haven't indeed, unless the very first, to which I attached no importance."

"All I say is, I did not know it," said Mr. Vassie again, in an aggrieved tone.

"The fact is, Tabitha thought that if she said too much we should insist on her coming home again," said Mrs. Vassie, with a sudden gleam of the truth. "She likes the life, and she is willing to put up with anything rather than lose it."

"Your daughters have certainly no great love for their home," said Mr. Vassie. "I don't like it in them."

"Girls of the present day are so determined to have their own way. Every one says the same thing. It doesn't matter how you bring them up; they're all alike. Here is Tabitha, five-and-twenty next birthday, wanting to live in a home of her own, like a man, or as she might need to do if she were left a single woman of my age; though even I, with all my experience, should find it very lonely and unpleasant."

"A block of workmen's dwellings! Let out to single women! Single, I dare say! Heaven knows what sort of women they'd be! Tabitha's crazy. It's not to be thought of. If she lives in London, she must live in a respectable way."

"Where can we place her? Miss Meal's, so it seems (I don't know), is far away from this club. I haven't been in London for years, except for a day or two with you, Edward; and then we stayed at a hotel; I re-

member the dinner cost a good deal, and was not really well cooked then. Once or twice I've slept at Lydia Laslett's, and frequently, when I first married, for a day's shopping. I know Regent Street; is the club near there? A club for women is such a new thing. Shall I ask Lydia Laslett?"

"How should I know where it is? Why can't girls stay at home and do their duty as they should? A daughter living nobody knows where, and mixing herself up with goodness knows who; it won't do at all."

"Shall I tell Tabitha you'll settle about it when you come to town, and meanwhile she's to stay where she is?"

"No such thing! I disapprove of the whole concern, and I don't intend to mix myself up in it. The place for girls is at home. Write and ask Lydia Laslett if you please. And tell Tabitha that as for furnishing, I'll do nothing of the kind. By the time she got this she'd change her mind and want something else. It's like girls and women; never know their own minds. Tabitha has cost more than her sisters already. She thinks ten-pound notes are to be had for the asking; I find them hard enough to get; and if one isn't wanting another is. Last year it was Ada."

"Tabitha does speak properly about that. She says she knows our expenses are heavy. She says she could pay it back when she got something to do. She seems to feel that as money's short she ought to make herself independent. And she assures me she can live with this Miss Adnitt very cheaply."

"A nice thing if she goes about talking to Laslett and the rest of them! Independent indeed! She wants to be that, it's very plain. I hope if you write to Lydia you'll make it clear that all this about shortness of money is Tabitha's own invention. I've never asked her to live very cheaply. There's plenty of



money for everything I consider proper. Things don't pay very well, but here's a good home, and what more does she want?"

"Would it be well to lend her the money, and let her pay it back?" suggested Mrs. Vassie. "That is her own proposition."

"Pay back! Ten pounds!" said Mr. Vassie. "She'd be the first of my children who ever paid anything back. I shall give what I choose, but no lending."

"Then I don't know what is to be done," said Mrs. Vassie.

"I don't approve of your daughter's action, and I never have. I don't interfere with your arrangements for the girls; but I must say if she'd meant to stay away from home she'd better have made that clear at the beginning, and then we might have seen what could have been done. One of James Laslett's girls has gone to Cambridge; and James Laslett has done very well; he must have made enough to keep his girls at home. I was given to understand that she'd be tired of it all in a month or two. I don't care for the position she has made for herself at all. If my poor mother could see her, she'd turn in her grave."

Mrs. Vassie went back to the school-room to discuss the situation with the girls.

"Tabitha causes me a good deal of anxiety, and just now too, when I'm naturally anxious about dear Ada's state of health. I do think Tabitha is thoughtless to ask for ten pounds; she must know, I'm sure I do, that there is nothing so likely to upset papa as asking for money when he didn't expect it. I don't think he will send it to her. And he feels hurt that she did not speak to him openly when she was at home last Christmas."

"Tabitha did tell me," cried Hilda. "And she said she was afraid if she told you too much, you'd want to keep her at home. And of course, though it was horrid, she'd much rather stay there than come back home."

Then Mrs. Vassie laid her head on the school-room table, and burst out crying. She is not a crying woman. But it was so bitter to be told, and as if it were a quite natural feeling, that to stay at home by her side was, to any one of her children, the only unbearable fate. She had planned and striven for them since before they were born. She had confined her whole energies and interests between the four walls of her home. She thought about the children, seldom about anything else, from morning to night. She asked nothing but to have them all round her, living happy in the warmth of her minute care. She had given them her whole self, and they tossed it away, saying that it was not enough. This was how it had ended. Tabitha chose bodily discomfort rather than the home her mother had planned. And Ada had jumped at the first man who asked her, not at all curious to inquire what her future would be, but sure that it must be more amusing than her past. Mrs. Vassie cried bitterly. And the girls looked on amazed.

"I'm sure Tabby doesn't mean to do anything wrong," said Mary. "And I dare say Miss Meal's isn't so bad. And of course papa means to be kind to Tabby."

"There's nothing to do, and nothing to look forward to here at home," said Bella. "It's awfully dull. I dare say you can't do anything to help it, mamma, so it's no good crying; but there it is all the same. I wouldn't do as Tabby does for anything you could

offer me; but I should like to see the world before I get too old."

"When your father and I are dead and gone you will have your own money, and then you can please yourselves," said Mrs. Vassie. "We are not as young as we were, and we shall make room for you, I dare say. You'll not find it as pleasant as you think."

"Why talk about such dreadful things?" said Hilda. "Tabby's done nothing wicked. Only we girls want something to do while we're young, and before we've lost the strength to do it. And we can't all be married, because there's not enough men to marry us."

"Marriage lies in the hands of the Almighty," said Mrs. Vassie gravely. "So far it has not been ordained for you, or for Tabitha and your cousins. And it isn't all pleasure when you are married, though girls sometimes talk as if it were. They little know. Poor little Ada has a good deal to suffer."

"And Tabby has a good deal to suffer. But they'd neither of them change. That's all I said. You're not angry with Ada because on the whole she'd rather stay where she is. Why are you so angry with Tabby? She only wants her fling. Ada's mistress at Ransham, except where Ernest's master, which is most times, I suspect. Tabby's mistress of nothing here."

"There can't be two mistresses," said Mrs. Vassie with fire, her tears dry. "I've seen no good come of taking off your boots before you go to bed. It's a vulgar saying, but it's true for all that. And that's what Tabitha and a good many other girls too have yet to learn. Though my life is made hard to me, there is no reason why I should shrink from doing my duty in the few years that yet remain. And your father's duty and mine, heads of the household, is to rule."

## CHAPTER XVIII

### VIEWS OF HOME

A working woman with a quarter's wages in her pocket, paid in advance, and with nothing to do to earn it, may well feel wealthy for the first time in her life. And when a secretary's salary is to begin long before the quarter is ended, the Fates may at last be reckoned as entirely propitious. Miss Vassie, through the sunny morning in the underground room at Miss Meal's, sewed busily at a dress intended to adorn the person of the secretary of the Madeline club. The view from the window was not cheerful, consisting for the most part in a succession of ill-shaped feet and the bottoms of frayed and dusty garments; with now and again a child, truant from school, stooping on the pavement, trying hard to see some amusing sight that may compensate it for the scolding and ill conscience it has earned. Within, the view was not less depressing for one who cared to look on the dull side of life. Miss Meal's boarders are seldom indoors by daylight, and it is contrary to her policy to make young ladies too comfortable. She thinks ill of the prevailing modern habit of luxury, more particularly for young persons, so that her dining-room is a bare, square apartment, with oilcloth on the floor, and stiff chairs ranged round the walls, and in the middle a long table, covered with a much-washed cloth of red and black cotton. But for Miss Vassie in her present mood nothing more was to be desired, except perhaps a little

more light than found its way in through the unwash window-panes, and down the steep area. She sat up straight on one of the stiff-backed chairs, the better to seize her work, which was laid out on the long table to great advantage. I wish I could think that no seamstress does her work under more unfavourable conditions. And I am sure that few seamstresses look forward to so brilliant a future as filled Miss Vassie's mind that day.

As she sewed she was living out her life in the two rooms opposite Miss Adnitt's. She had seen one or two pieces of second-hand furniture that she intended to bargain for and to buy. Such treasure-trove was the result of many long walks, and much quivering of the heart when the dealers came suddenly out from their lairs, pouncing upon her, as if they would bind then and there the coveted objects on her back, and empty her purse into their till, without so much as a "by your leave." She forestalled the fearsome delight of choosing a chintz, and all the uncertainty of finding out beforehand how it would look when it was up. She even threw down her dress in the most critical moment of tacking the bodice, in order to reckon again on paper to its uttermost limits the expenditure of her father's ten pounds, added to the remains of the salary paid by Mrs. Goodhurst. There were a few covetable objects that could hardly be squeezed out of ten pounds, that yet might be managed out of eleven, or even out of ten guineas. Then Tabitha took a soaring flight of fancy and alighted on a cheque for fifteen pounds, folded in a letter full of fatherly loving-kindness.

Her rooms furnished and habitable, Tabitha received visits from all her sisters in turn. Bella went to the play, and, though all her best finery was scarcely up to



the occasion's level, walked in the park on Sunday, after church. Mary heard the great preachers, and wandered up and down admiring the shops while Tabitha was engaged in the club. Lizzie and Jim once went even to the pantomime, and breathed hard in an ecstasy of admiration before the windows decked for Christmas. How they enjoyed it! It was something for them all to look forward to. When Miss Adnitt was away from home, on a rare occasion, it would be possible to have two at once. Visitors could bring a hamper from Benscote, and Tabitha could economize for weeks beforehand to make up for the rest. And at last, in Tabitha's busy fancy, Mrs. Vassie had paid London a visit, enjoying a rare relief from the cares of home; and on one Sunday, she and Tabitha had talked over old times with a half-forgotten friend or two; and mother and daughter were again united, agreeing to differ upon those minor points of taste and opinion where once they had found themselves unhappily divergent.

At half-past twelve o'clock Tabitha remembered that she needed some braid and a bit of lining; and that it would be convenient to buy it and some lunch at the same time. Miss Meal charged a shilling for a midday dinner, which is a good deal of money, when to economize is part of the brilliant hope for the future. She slipped on her hat and went out. The streets were full. Every one was going in quest of food. There were wealthy women strolling out of the shops and consulting their watches to see if they could spend more money before the luncheon-bell rang; there were beggars with open hands edging the pavement, whining for bread; there were errand-boys scurrying home to dinner, jostling all the world that they might have time for another mouthful; and there were busi-

ness men sauntering to their place of refreshment, because it was the usual thing to do. There were women laden with parcels, and women driving perambulators, tied to the present; women, gloveless, with worn and dirty hands, women neat and grey with thin faces and eager eyes, fixed far on in an uncertain future. And there was Tabitha Vassie, framing, in unsatisfied interest, out of her limited experiences, a story for each, some true and many false; thinking all the while that a shilling is a large sum, taking much earning, and that the balance of it, after a cheap dinner is bought and eaten and forgotten, may help towards the making of a home in two tiny rooms; a home where would be freedom from uncongenial company; a home where is a right to sit as long as one will; and from whence no power can drive the owner into the streets, to escape the levy of dinner tolls. It would not do to go yet indoors; Miss Meal had once charged Tabitha a shilling for a dinner that she had not eaten, because she happened to be in the house at half-past one. She stopped before a furniture shop to examine a table, a necessary; then to throw a longing glance at a bureau, a very desirable luxury. Next came a heap of chintz lying in the window. Tabitha admired a particular shade of dull green; but taste at Benscote would go rather in the direction of gaiety; and she determined to choose to please them, inasmuch as to her the rooms would be delightful anyhow, robed in any colour; whereas the sisters and Mrs. Vassie might take some time to find out all the beauty. A book-shop adjoins. When Tabitha was older and richer she meant to buy books; at present the interest of living life absorbed her. She used to say she would rather see for herself, while her own eyes lasted, than read what other persons, however wise, have seen. The

primers and so forth, that she had to use for her class work, gave her all she desired for that time: bare statements of fact, of which she made what she could, when they were well mixed with such facts as she had accumulated for herself during her quarter of a century.

It turned out a wet evening, dismal and cold. Miss Adnitt was the first of the boarders to come in, and she found a smouldering fire in the room where the supper was laid. Through the basement window the light from the street flickered, and the feet of the passers-by splashed through the slush. It was good to be indoors. Other women still hurried by, as if at the end of their journey some brighter prospect awaited them. But some with ragged skirt and broken boots, dripping at each slow step, lingered and dawdled, in spite of the cold, miserable exceedingly, and most of all in that no vision of brightness or warmth or comfort lured them on. One woman with a boy passed the window, then turned and came back aimlessly, dragging the boy by the hand. On no way was anything to attract her.

Miss Adnitt seized the poker and compelled the fire to a small flame.

"No one in?" she said. "And this is the greeting you prepare for a wanderer? Gazing out of window, instead of thinking of your friends?"

"I was thinking how happy we are," said Tabitha, turning round. "It is so delightful to know we two have a home of our own at last. I have so hated being here, and if you were gone it would have been worse than ever. Yet now all this is over, I begin to think that perhaps I was ungrateful. The poor creatures out there would change gladly even with me."

"I am too hungry for moralizing. Shall we begin? Our old friends the loaf and the cheese. I thought

how it would be when we left it last night and Miss Mitchell brought us a feast from her place of resort. It's bad policy. We ought each to pocket our portion of Miss Meal's dainties if we don't eat them, and dispose of them to a beggar, should we find one minded to accept. To-night I shall pursue a different plan."

She cut slices of bread which she toasted slowly by the fire. Then she buttered them while Tabitha toasted the cheese. It smelt quite savoury, and Tabitha thought there was a little fun to be had out of life, in spite of the depressing sights in the street.

"What is this odour, young ladies?" exclaimed a voice in the doorway. "It pervades the whole house. And it spoils the knives dreadfully. And you have used nearly all the butter, and the other young ladies not yet come in. I cannot undertake to provide you with a hot supper at this time of night for the price you pay. It really doesn't answer as it is, what with the heavy rent, and the taxes, and the price of good food."

"I've invested a penny in a toasting-fork of my own," said Miss Adnitt. "It's my first purchase towards housekeeping. So that disposes of the knife difficulty. The knives won't stand much more racket; you're right there, Miss Meal. As for prices, you've told us so often that we cost more than we pay. And it wasn't that Miss Vassie and I did not sympathize. We weren't free agents. The first moment we could, we relieved you of the burden of our maintenance; we shall be gone in a month."

"You young ladies don't think of me," said Miss Meal irritably. "And I see you are taking milk to-night instead of beer. Is that to continue, because I must know and arrange accordingly?"

"Miss Vassie went shares, in exchange for the loan



of the penny toasting-fork," said Miss Adnitt, promptly. "Excuse my attending to our supper while I'm talking to you. Toasted cheese is a thing that is not worth eating unless it is done to a turn. And I should be sorry to have to waste this and cut another slice."

Poor Miss Meal sighed heavily as she retired vanquished. Failure is no more pleasant to bear because it is due to one's fault. And she has long since compounded with her creditors, given up her boarding-house, and been hidden by her relatives, Sir Theophilus Meal and the rest, in a remote part of the country, where no travellers pass, bringing and carrying gossip to those whom it does not concern. And I suppose there is not a creature in the world that will shed a tear when she dies; the which, as it seems to me, is a punishment heavy enough for selfishness less excusable than hers.

"Don't let us talk of her," said Miss Adnitt. "I feel myself degraded that ever I've passed a year under her roof. When we get free, this year shall slip out of our record. We'll agree to glue the page together so that it never can be opened again."



## CHAPTER XIX

### A CLEAR-HEADED ADVISER

Tabitha, her heart heavy like a stone, carried her mother's reply to Miss Sawday, in the middle of the morning.

"I can't see you now," said the lady. "Amuse yourself with a book till dinner-time, and then we'll talk things over."

So Tabitha waited and wondered how many more years she must work before she might have a home of her own, to carry out her pet projects. She contrasted her lot with that of Miss Sawday, who is not so surprisingly clever, and who never had any money to help her on. But she had the goodwill of her parents to hearten her for her work, and a free hand to make the most of her opportunities. Tabitha had notes to write out for her class that afternoon; but she could not do them; questions as to what her mother would next do or say kept interposing themselves in the middle of her work. She threw the notes aside, and took up a novel, hoping that it might push itself obtrusively forward.

Near the end of the morning Mr. Abraham Sawday came in. Tabitha had not seen him since her visit to Miss Ide, now years ago. He has a comfortable, well-favoured presence. As she shook hands, Tabitha reflected on the reversal of their positions.

"I'm in town for a day or two; and I've run down to see Agnes. She's generally free for a bit about

dinner-time. She told me she had seen you, and that you were thinking of taking a secretaryship or something of that sort. Agnes knows about everything that is going on in London, I tell her. I wish she'd put a job or two in my way."

"Miss Sawday is very clever; she is thought a great deal of."

"Not half what she's worth. If I were to tell you how she's worked, and got herself on since father died! We've done all we could, and there's always the home to come to, but business is not what it was, and it's a hard matter. We must work to make things pay. And she has worked, no mistake. There's not many like her in London, I know."

"It's such a pleasure to work, if only you may," said Miss Vassie. "I don't pity people who work, not one bit. The hard thing is to sit and do nothing."

"Sometimes I tell her she works a deal too hard," said Mr. Sawday. "She's got this place very nice, hasn't she? And if you'd seen it when she came here, you'd hardly have thought she could. But that's Agnes; if a thing is to be done, she'll do it."

"We are singing your praises," said Tabitha, as Miss Sawday came into the room.

"Don't let him talk nonsense!" said Miss Sawday. "We all have our insane spot. Abraham has showed you his very soon."

"It's nice to be believed in," said Tabitha. "I think I could do a good deal if somebody would expect it of me and push me on, instead of always holding me back, and trying to make me see more lions in the path than are there."

"I know," said Miss Sawday. "That sort of thing breaks the spirit of more women than one will ever count. Talk about work killing them! That's Abra-

ham's craze. It's not work, but worry; the worrying ways of the very people who love them best."

Tabitha sighed. "They are made so; they don't mean it," she said.

"I've been thinking it over. I'll tell you what I'll do. I will see Mrs. Laslett; I think it must be the same. I used to teach her children once upon a time. I thought of seeing her in any case. The Committee are all right; there'll be no difficulty about your getting the place as far as they go. But there's no telling if influential private members might not spring a candidate on us at the last moment. Mrs. Laslett belongs to the Madeline; now and again she attends. And she knows a lot of people. If I can get her to our side, can she work the Benscote oracle?"

"Mamma means to write to her, she says."

"Meanwhile don't lose heart! Let us get the secretaryship first, and you can give provisional notice to Miss Meal. If the worst comes to the worst you could always come here for a week or two till your people have found something to their taste."

"But they're not even looking out," said Tabitha. "It won't be done in a week or two, nor a month or two. Mamma does not know much about London. If she came up what could she do?"

"And Mr. Vassie? He is often in town, and he knows a bit about everything," said Mr. Sawday, who had the smallest opinion of Mr. Vassie's knowledge, founded upon his experience of Mr. Vassie's dealings in country produce. "Take my word for it, Agnes," said Mr. Sawday to his sister when they were alone, "the old gentleman's as pigheaded and as ignorant as you please. He's always giving out his ideas at Benscote where nobody wants 'em. You may be pretty sure that if a man don't know what lies under his nose, in

the place where he was born and his father before him, he don't know much else that's of any good to him, or anyone else in the world."

"Thank Heaven you and I weren't born poor gentry; too poor to hold our own among the real gentry, and too proud to do what lies before us with the talent we've got."

"I'm downright sorry for those Vassie girls," said Mr. Sawday. "They do say the old gentleman's lost money. Anyhow it's harder to get any out of him than blood out of a stone. And there's one of them married, nothing but a child, and he old enough to be her father. There was a good deal of talk about it in the village. But there's a lot of them; and they're glad to get them married off to anybody."

"Isn't it a happy match, then?"

"Happy enough, for all I know. What do you expect? Fewell's not a bad sort. Treats his men well, as he easy can, when he's not got to live out of it."

"The married one's not my affair. This one is. It worries me. Though why it should I don't know, for she's only one out of hundreds, and we owe nothing to the Vassies."

"Take care what you do; they're touchy."

"I'll take care. I must think it over. The fact is they want gentility that they're not prepared to pay for."

"It's the way with a good many."

"Look here, Abraham! Do you suppose they have money and won't spend it, or have none, and won't say so? There are ten of them. When all's said and done, will they have enough to live upon?"

"Hard to say. They do say he's lost money; and he can't have had very much; I don't see where it

could have come from. His father and grandfather had no family to speak of, and they rubbed along all right. But land's bad, even for those who stick to it, and know what's what. He doesn't. Leaves everything to his man. He writes books, so they say; don't read 'em myself. Is there money to be made there? I don't know about that. There's none made out of his land, that I know. And think of his family,—ten. Mr. Bob's girl, she has money; he'd have done pretty well if he hadn't died so early. It won't be much that'll come to these girls. They'll live maybe; but no fat living, that's pretty sure."

"Meanwhile the girl's handicapped both ways. She hasn't the money, and that's the fate of a good many who yet manage to do pretty well without it. But she's worried to live as if the money were there, and that's what a girl's earnings won't run to. She looks like a little washed-out rag. But it's the worry, not the work that does it. Those Vassies have all their lives tried to keep up appearances larger than their income; but then they've had nothing else to do, and one must spend one's life upon something, worthy or unworthy. They want this child, who has plenty else to do, to begin on the same tack; and she can't, for she needs all her strength to do her work. Why can't people find courage to publish the amount of their income in *The Times*, and then to live comfortably within it? This sort of silly pretence makes me sick at heart. And it deceives no one. You and I know the Vassies' income within a little, and so does every one who wants to know."

"Except the man's own daughters, according to you."

"Yes; with that absurd exception. Now you have to be off, and so must I, especially if I am to see Mrs.



Laslett before nightfall. To get the secretaryship settled is the first thing. There must be some place in London where Mrs. Vassie is not ashamed to bestow her daughter. Can I drop you anywhere? I'm going in a hansom; time is precious. And it is hard to plead with becoming dignity and success if one has muddy boots in a fine lady's drawing-room. No? Then good-bye. I'll be in the day after to-morrow, if you'll come. By that time this first point must be settled. Tabitha Vassie will most likely be here."

Late in the afternoon Mrs. Laslett sat down to her table to answer Mrs. Vassie's letter.

"I have just been hearing from a Miss Sawday, who is a member of the club, about this secretaryship. If you don't wish Tabitha to have it, say so by return; for I can easily manage that she's defeated. Otherwise, she is pretty sure, I understand. Let me know definitely. As to a place to live in, that may come later. Shall I look out for a family of position, where she'd see a little society? Of course that must be paid for; people won't take care of other people's daughters unless they are paid handsomely. Failing that, I hear of two rooms near the club, quite suitable, if Edward does not feel justified in affording greater outlay. Perhaps I could give the benefit of my advice in furnishing; twenty pounds or so would do it with economy quite nicely. I hear from other sources that Miss Meal was not the person we took her for, that her house was uncomfortable, and the boarders of a common class. I had no idea Tabitha had been there so long. I wonder she did not tell you before. I haven't seen her for months. Mrs. Goodhurst is abroad; her husband took her to get over her trouble. We shall be pleased to see Edward when he is in town any time; it is a long time since he was here. Of

course, he generally goes to see Tabitha, and so can't spare time for us; but my husband hopes to see him to dinner next time he is up."

She did not post the letter till her husband came in.

"I put it that way," she said, "for it's just as well to know once for all what the Vassies will and what they won't or can't do for those girls. If they have the means, they really ought to give Tabitha a better chance; if they've none, I shall do my best to encourage her to work, for I'm sure we don't want to keep them. As I often say, if Edward Vassie had worked half as hard as you've done, he'd be rolling in riches by this time. I've no patience with a man who reads and reads, soaking everything in and bringing nothing out; and who then pleads poverty. People won't pay you for what you keep shut up inside. And I asked Edward to dinner; I know you don't like him. But it was the right thing to do. Very likely he won't come. And if he does, I'll ask somebody to meet him, and he'll sit next me. The girls must amuse him. He likes to be talked to. It saves him trouble."

## CHAPTER XX

### A PERPLEXED ADVISER

To write two letters by return of post, definitely hindering her daughter from obtaining the secretaryship and from hiring the flat next to Miss Adnitt's, meant a greater responsibility and more decided action than Mrs. Vassie could take. And her clear answers to moral questions had got a little confused. Events had not turned out exactly according to design. Even marriage did not seem, as it had seemed a short while ago, the straight way out of all girls' difficulties. Ada was ailing. Mrs. Vassie would have felt less worried if she had had no one but Tabitha to think about just then. But she sat and thought about Ada by the half-hour together, not coming to any conclusion, and starting again from the same premises when the next half-hour of leisure came. Tabitha, at any rate, never once hinted that she regretted the step she had taken; which might mean only that Tabitha was made of different stuff, or was an older woman, or that she was less sure of her mother's quick sympathy in any outspoken regret. Or it might mean a very great deal more than that, for little Ada had never been of a complaining or peevish disposition; and it was pitiful to see a look of plaintive endurance in place of her pert gaiety.

Not that Ernest Fewell was other than a good husband, kindness itself in buying for his wife everything that she expressed the slightest whim for, and quite foolishly loth to let her out of his sight. Nor was Ada other than a good wife; she never forgot her husband for one moment; her eyes were continually wandering

to his side of the room, when, by chance, they two were so far apart; and when he was away, she started at every slightest sound, lest it might betoken his return.

Mr. Vassie shared none of his wife's anxieties. He said Fewell was an excellent fellow, and that any girl was lucky who got so doting a husband; and that it could be seen with half an eye that Ada was as foolishly fond as he: she never took her eyes off him if he was anywhere about. For his part, he would sooner have a less devoted son-in-law, for Fewell was a man with whom, if you got him alone, you might hold some sensible conversation.

The girls were even more unsympathetic.

"What can you want, mamma?" they said. "Ernest is devoted. And he would buy half the moon for Ada if she wanted it, and it were for sale. She must indeed be ungrateful if she grumbles at that."

Mrs. Vassie indignantly disclaimed grumbling.

"Then why do you say you're anxious?" asked Mary. "It will all come right presently. Don't look on the black side of things."

"I never liked Ernest," said Hilda. "I couldn't have married him, not if he'd been the last man in the world, and hung over with diamonds. Ada does. Tastes differ, luckily. I hate men who are so very affectionate."

"Wait till your turn comes," jeered Bella; "and then tell us."

"My dear," said Mrs. Vassie, "I don't think that is quite the sort of thing to say. What do you know about such things?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Hilda carelessly. "I don't, all the same. You must either like ways or dislike them."

So Mrs. Vassie had to bear her anxieties alone. And in the midst thereof, she let the minor matter of Tabitha's lodgings stand over. Perhaps some light might by hazard be thrown on the affair; and in the meanwhile Miss Meal's was, at the worst, a safe place for a girl to be in. It was all very for Lydia Laslett to talk in that airy way about paying handsomely. Folks speak as they find. It was hard enough to get money for daily expenses, and Mrs. Vassie dare not, she assured herself she positively dare not, ask Mr. Vassie to give more money to Tabitha. Had he not definitely refused the ten pounds for the furniture? And when the head of the house speaks is he not to be obeyed? And once given, is it not wiser to stick to a verdict? What becomes of authority if parents change their minds? Tabitha had had her answer; it ought to suffice once for all. She knew, though outsiders like Mrs. Laslett and Miss Sawday could not, that Geoffrey had to be placed in London; that he had determined to be a doctor; and that boys must be made happy and comfortable, or there is no knowing what may happen, even with the most carefully reared. Sisters, aware of this, ought to be ready to bear even want or hardship, in order to avert such irreparable misfortunes. And Tabitha had never definitely said she was in want; without looking over her old letters to find negative evidence of the kind, the statement was proved by her unwillingness to come home. A boy cannot be expected to do with less than a pound or two a week in London, and then there are his clothes and pocket-money. If he is not dressed as a gentleman, can he keep his position? And if he has no money to mix with his peers, can you blame him if he takes to low company?

Such were Mrs. Vassie's reasons. And in the face



of them, that Tabitha should get a secretaryship or something to enable her to pay her way seemed highly desirable.

Mrs. Vassie wrote to Mrs. Laslett, beginning to answer the letter backwards. First, on behalf of Mr. Vassie, she sent thanks for the invitation, which he was not able to accept for his next visit to town. Then she said that Miss Sawday belonged to the town of Ransham, and that she knew her but slightly. Next she told some family news, and commented: "The death of the little Goodhurst was extremely sad." And at the end, when the paper was nearly full, she added: "I haven't heard much about this secretaryship. Tabitha seemed to wish for it, so I suppose it is a pretty good thing. No doubt I shall hear further presently."

Then she wrote to Tabitha on the same plan. Three sides of the sheet were filled with news of the family; of affairs at Ransham Lodge; of Geoffrey's prospects; of weddings and sickness in the village. And on the fourth, where the writing had to be small to get so much in, she began: "If you have set your heart upon taking this secretaryship, it is useless to ask my advice. You know we really do not approve of anything of the kind. But you are of age, and you have chosen to go your own way. Expenses are very heavy just now, and you have already cost more than your sisters. I have never seen this Miss Adnitt. I know nothing about her. And I think you are not careful enough to keep family matters to ourselves. Even to Mrs. Laslett you should be careful. If you have anything to say, say it to me or papa, who is, I am sure, always ready to listen."

There being no organized opposition, Tabitha obtained the secretaryship, and entered speedily upon

her work with the immediate fear of bankruptcy banished.

The members of the club were then, and are now, a mixed lot of mortals, affording great variety of type to a student of human nature. And the secretary during her working hours sits before a sort of lottery, never knowing from one moment to another when the heavy curtain that joins and separates the two rooms may be lifted, nor what manner of woman or of man it may be who next comes to be interviewed at her desk. The managers were never altogether of my way of thinking, yet they are much more amusing company than either Miss Meal or the villagers at Benscote. And the coming man, and the last new woman, is sure to be brought into the Madeline, though it be only for a single cup of tea or for five minutes' preoccupied chat. As for the ordinary members, they most of them possess a pet interest, the overflowings of which from a full heart they are always eager to pour out upon a woman with bright eyes and a sympathetic face, who is paid so much a year to sit in a given place and make herself popular. Some secretaries might have found loquacious members a bore; not so Tabitha. It was perhaps good that she went to a silent and solitary home when work was finished, and this was all the talking she could share or might enjoy during the twenty-four hours. The difficulty was that too much time was spent in hearing schemes and grievances; then the books got behindhand, and she must stay after hours to finish them, when late at night between her and Miss Meal's lay an hour's tedious journey. Her day's work was already too hard and too long, and the two hours cut out of it for travelling were sorely missed.

Her friends decided to press her to action. Miss

Adnitt came in one afternoon to say that she had the refusal of the rooms opposite hers for twenty-four hours only. "Now or never," she said. "I don't pretend to unselfishness. It makes all the difference to me having a neighbour whom I like."

Tabitha set off to Miss Sawday for consultation. "What shall I do?" she said. "It's too far where I am, not to speak of its being too horrid, and dear besides. I don't know what to be at. Sometimes I think I shall have to give it up, and confess myself beaten. I can't bear to oppose them at home, and there's the furniture to buy. Can I possibly afford it?"

"There's one thing I am sure of," said Miss Sawday. "Whatever else should hold you back, it shouldn't be any considerations of money or of ease. If on the face of it you think it right to go home and give up your work, go. I don't say that you should lightly go against the promptings of love or the call of obedience. I think on the contrary, that it should only be done in the last resort and with many misgivings. But having decided, in spite of love and obedience, do, for decency's sake, have the courage to act in spite of money. Do not do for money or for fear what you will not do for love. If you haven't yet found out that a mother or a home is worth more to you than money (let them be as dull and perverse as they may), then you have a good deal to learn about the truths of the world. I don't advise you one way or another. But if it's only a case of money, we'll manage it somehow. If the worst came to the worst I could lend it you; you can pay back when you please; if never, it would not ruin me. As for the rooms themselves, why not wire and ask your mother to wire 'yes' or 'no'? If they absolutely don't wish it, they should at least take the responsibility of saying so straight out."

"Mother will never do that. She does not know London. What can she do?" said Tabitha, shaking her head.

"Do?" said Miss Sawday. "It is easy to say what any one should do in such a case. If she can't act herself, she should trust your judgment, and say so, without any bones in the matter. Always understood, that, having trusted it, she is to let your decision stand quietly. How old are you? Twenty-four? Twenty-five? You're not a child. I expect this year in London has rubbed the rest of the child out of you, if there was any when you came."

"There wasn't much," said Tabitha, smiling. "I'm afraid not. Children act spontaneously, and within certain limits are free and happy. We had always to think about everything; there are so many of us; and the house is smaller than it looks outside; and papa being fond of study, we must think not to disturb him. It's absurd, but I feel more like a child here in London. One learns, and looks forward, and life is so enjoyable."

"Poor little girl!" said Miss Sawday, dropping quickly out of her dogmatic mood. "You will have a very happy time, at least I hope so, when you have a place of your own. I know I was very happy when I first came up."

"I don't doubt that," said Tabitha. "It would be so happy for us all. I could have them to stay—the girls I mean. They have so little change."

"I have something in my mind. Can you write? Could you manage articles for a paper that Madame Renner (you know her at the Society) edits? You should hear most of what's going on at the club. She is always ready to enlist fresh writers; and even more ready," added Miss Sawday, smiling, "to do a good



turn to women rebels against the order of things as they are."

"I have written things," Tabitha acknowledged, blushing. "I write now just to keep my hand in when I have time. What can I write about? I can't bear asking them at home for money? If only I could earn instead!"

"What you like has nothing to do with it; the thing is to do what's right. If you were my daughter (it's not so far fetched—I'm nearly old enough) I should wish to be asked. But take the letter to Madame Renner. You'll not be so rich that you can't spend your earnings and ten pounds or so besides. I make that a condition; write to-night, and ask for an answer by return post before you either take or refuse the rooms."

"I will do as you bid me," promised Tabitha. "You have been good to me. And I've often done even the right things in the wrong way, so they say."

Miss Vassie waited all next day at the club for a telegram that never came; and when night fell she went round to Miss Adnitt's, and agreed to take the rooms from that day fortnight. The two had a picnic supper together in the studio, and made plans by the dozen for their combined future. Miss Adnitt had orders enough to keep her busy for six months, so that she was not unreasonably happy.

"Old Lady Pounsford is a brick," she cried enthusiastically. "I was there at a very grand party last night. She asks all her friends to give me orders. I have come to the conclusion that it pays better to be alone in the world, and with a reputation for poverty. People can help me out of their charity bag. Most people have one, though there's sometimes not much put into it. You're really worse off than I am, be-



cause you're supposed to be backed up by your people at home. Folks don't think you a proper object of charity."

"No more I am," Tabitha declared stoutly. "I have nothing to complain of. I'm to have these rooms; a home of my own; what more can I want?"

She took out her paper and once again went over the prices of necessities, and measured the margin that would be left for modest luxuries. Was she foolish? What bride is there who does not count it among her enjoyable privileges to furnish and deck a home after her own fancy? It should not be half as costly, and may not be nearly as spacious as the home she is so joyfully leaving; yet no one either scoffs or wonders at her pleasures. And we who know the girls do not argue that it is the prospective husband alone who really ornaments the house, and that these furnishing trifles are but accidental additions to his glory. I should be as far from saying that as for echoing Hilda's youthful statement that the marrying counts for nought and the trimmings for all. The Fates had not decreed a husband for Tabitha, but they had bestowed a home. And the girl innocently joyed over its making.

Next mid-day she had a letter from her mother, saying that this haste and demand for decision by wire meant ridiculous affectation. There could be no haste about a matter that had been discussed weeks ago.

Indeed at Benscote it would be less unseemly haste than sinful waste to hurry over an important decision of this kind, when it might have lasted for the filling of minds and conversations through many weeks. 'Twas the everlasting difference between town and country natures and habits: dawdling indecision that stops all business; absurd fuss and hurry about noth-

ing; debating over and over points where nothing was altered since last the debate dwindled from inanition; rushing into irretrievable action without absolute certainty that no side has been overlooked.

Mrs. Vassie declined so much as to ask her husband again for the ten pounds lest it should help Tabitha to carry out a course of undesirable action. If Tabitha would, she must, and she must take the consequences. It was not a case of money; money could have been found for anything really necessary, but not for the indulgence of headstrong caprice. Mrs. Vassie's language became stronger as she warmed to her work, and as she sealed the letter she had, no doubt, a comfortable assurance that she had done that day a disagreeable duty without shrinking.

And as, in the nature of things, we are all most repentant for those sins that we do not commit, and are least guilty of those faults that we have grace to repent of, Mrs. Vassie made special supplication for the pardon of the things that she had done and should have left undone. If you had done nothing, she said, you could not have done wrong. Tabitha, on the contrary, felt the grievous burden of those things left undone that should have been done. If you had done nothing, so she argued, you could not possibly have done the right.

Mrs. Vassie, however, complaining that her daughter was too resistant, yet contrived that under the repeated blows of disappointment Tabitha should be in a fair way to become as tough as steel. Tabitha had agreed to hire the rooms in all good faith; let who would be vacillating, it should not be she. She took from her pocket once more the piece of paper that she had so carefully written, and from it she erased, without hesitation, every item that, by the most rigid interpretation, could be held as a luxury. So diminished, the

sum-total looked more manageable. Before nightfall she had carried her draft agreement for the rooms to Miss Sawday, who, with the timely help of her brother, who chanced to be again in town, looked it over, and approved.

"And I say this," said Mr. Abraham Sawday to his sister, "I do admire her pluck. Right or wrong, she knows her own mind, and she sticks to it. She's put her back against the wall this time. She'll win. I know old Vassie. Good luck go with the girl, say I."

## CHAPTER XXI

### FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY

Tabitha Vassie was happy at last, in the full tide of work and feeling. Let those who follow her career always bear this in mind. Once upon a time she was entirely happy. It is more than we all can say for ourselves. The secret of her happiness lay in the fact that at length all her faculties found full employment. To a young and vigorous nature nothing is so certainly productive of happiness as plenty to do, and room to do it in, and praise when it is done well. Everything that she could do she was now called upon to do, and no wits are too keen, no energy is too great for the subduing of London. Faith in herself and in her cause she had, and she was surrounded by brethren in that faith. Hope for the future, near and far, was not wanting. Hilda would be here in a few months, and after that glory would double by sharing. As for charity or love, or love and charity, if you want to double the conceptions, these also are, no doubt, necessary for the completion of any girl's happiness, and to tell of them means the progress of the story. But I would have you remember that Tabitha was always anchored on love of her home and family, little though they recked of it; and love of that abiding sort may serve, better, possibly, than the stormier feelings, for the happiness of some lives, and these not the driest.

Mary had been for a day or two her guest, sleeping

soundly in the tiny bed while the hostess lay on the sofa and rose before the sun to transform the sitting-room again into such a parlour as Benscote was accustomed to. Mary never wakes for anything, nor hears of a night what she should not do. She carried no tales to Benscote of Tabitha's work in the small hours.

Nor was Tabitha without the stormier affections. Madame Renner, editress of *The Woman Patriot*, is a person whose name has since become notorious. Her name and her story were not then in everybody's mouth. She shed where she moved an impression of foreign mystery, to which conceit her dark skin and unfamiliar gait (though they hailed from no further than Ireland) lent credence. Carrying in her hand the letter of introduction, and in her pocket some manuscripts written at Benscote, Miss Vassie had knocked at Madame Renner's door, which was opened by a plain old woman, bent and lined, in rusty black, with a spring-cap of black setting off her swarthy face to ill advantage: her Miss Vassie took to be Madame's house-keeper, as surely she was; yet also her humble-minded and hard-working mother. I knew well the room where Miss Vassie was bidden to wait—an indescribable medley of many-hued draperies, of shabby fittings and rare curiosities, of rugs, furs, china, waving grasses; pictures on the wall, on easels, on the floor; a piano, with scattered heaps of music; Shakespeare, propped open with a modern Radical Association's report; a blotted manuscript tucked into the pages of a Society journal; and a writing-table of large size, strewn with littered papers. In that memory, without great labour in my logic, I am able to explain to myself most of Madame's after career.

But to a country girl, whose life had been cramped, and whose experiences narrow, this jumble could not



have been otherwise than extremely fascinating. I suppose that every person of more than average intellect begins life with uncertain determination as to the scope of its work. Shall it be scientific, to leave the world of pageant and of poetry for the enjoyment only of idle half-hours? Or literary, set apart from all the grand discoveries of this century? Is it better to live a seer, letting children and fools go their way unheeded; or to die a teacher, chained down forever to the elements of learning? How splendid to be a painter! How magnificent to be a musician! How enthralling to write or to say! Like the child with the nuts, Tabitha would have liked to grasp all life's possibilities at once; and though she had learned by this time that she must e'en let some of her coveted handful go, she dreamed still that perhaps other women were more fortunately or more capably constructed. How should she guess that Madame was one of the lifelong children, who, unable to make a choice and stick to it, are doomed in the end to lose all?

Madame Renner usually clothed herself in some clinging, many-folded stuff, often of a rich orange-brown, a colour undreamed of at Benscote for women's draperies; and the disarrangement of her masses of dark hair touched, according to Benscote standards, no middle course. Either she had broken off half-way through her toilet, or she was about to have her portrait painted. She threw herself on to a low sofa, with no more than a half apology for her weariness, settled herself among the faded cushions, tossed a bit of scarlet stuff over her feet, and then held out a hand to Miss Vassie, who, unaccustomed to this mode of greeting, had risen on her hostess's entrance, and put out her hand, encased in a new pair of gloves, according to the invariable custom of callers at Benscote.

Her hand had risen and fallen limply, and she stood, fixed on her feet but vacillating in her mind, while Madame Renner disposed herself in that picturesque attitude. Madame knew how to make the best of herself, no one better. The room was half in darkness, but some rays of the departing sun shone straight on to Madame's couch, till the loose lace on a background of yellow cushion lay round her black hair like an aureole. Half the theories of Tabitha's lifetime faded away. Had she not been brought up to believe that the first duty of a woman is to be clean and neat, and the second duty to be inconspicuous? What were Tabitha's plain homespun frock, and tight linen collar, and the sober hat that she had trimmed herself, in comparison with these golden splendours? Madame was conspicuous, and Miss Vassie only insignificant! Where was the code of manners that should have guided a daughter of Benscote in any social emergency? Vanished, like a part in a carefully prepared play, when the sharer in a dialogue misses his cue.

Great men and women, such as Tabitha meant to live and die amongst, are they of Madame's type, or of Miss Vassie's? Who can doubt? Are they so common—women who can paint pictures, speak four languages, and in public sing opera, read Shakespeare, edit a newspaper, and remain undeniably beautiful? Who can compare her greatness to that (for instance) of a middle-aged mother whose horizon is bounded by the pressing needs of ten children, and by the difficulties of "things" that won't pay? It seemed to Tabitha as if a door was opened and through it she saw a new world. I cannot make you see it all with your bodily eyes; only with the mind's eye of disillusioned, middle-aged folk. Possibly to us it looks no better nor purer, neither happier nor higher than the old. Tabitha

thought that the door of Paradise was standing ajar; and when Madame Renner, talking on in her melodious voice, told her that she might become, if she proved herself capable, a regular contributor to the periodical literature of the day, Tabitha thought that the door of Paradise was flung open and that she was to enter in.

Madame Renner is an impulsive person, easily kindled to passion. She listened while Tabitha, half unconsciously, told of her hard, hungry life in London, and of her narrow, mean life at Benscote, where the hunger was of the soul. She asked Tabitha of her brothers, what they were doing. I daresay Tabitha was, for the moment, innocently pleased to tell how well-placed they were. She heard of Ada and the brilliant marriage; of Hilda, who was to share Tabitha's present ambitions and her coming triumph.

"You fight against odds," said Madame. "But so the noble battles are always fought. And with all this you love them, you say. And you think they love you?"

"I'm sure of that," said Tabitha. "They don't understand. You see no woman in our family has ever done any work; now there are so many of us. I don't think there has ever been so large a family at Benscote before. These are things one can't control; so we must do the best we can. My people always say they will be proud of me when I am a success. They will understand at last, when they see what I can do."

"Understand being rich, no doubt," said Madame dryly. "You could then help the brothers to spend a little more, and help your sisters to sit and do nothing. A noble ambition, to be sure. And if you fail, what then? Will they understand then what you might have done?"

"I won't fail," said Tabitha, setting her teeth and

flushing. "Surely no one need fail who works as hard as I do. And they used not to say I was stupid, though since I've come to London I scarcely know. Other people know so much more." She paused a minute, and added, "If I fail, they'll put a foot on me and keep it there. Conquerors dictate their own terms, you know. You understand? But they think they're fighting on the side of right, and my being beaten would prove to their minds that I'd been wrong all through."

"My dear," said Madame, rising quickly and going to the strewn table, "you and I will not be beaten." She thrust into Miss Vassie's hand some old numbers of *The Woman Patriot*. "Go on as you have begun. And when you're downhearted, remember that you are only one in a great army. They *can't* think they're fighting for righteousness; they're fighting for their own hand. You believe in a God; they say they do; did He make a mistake when He gave you more brains than these brothers of yours? Are brains never to be used when they are put in a woman's body? Perhaps they are of the opinion that there are brains enough in the world, and fools too few: what? Your Teutonic, Protestant God seems so very often nothing more than a very vindictive, ultra-Protestant, Teutonic type of man, who measures everything by its brute force, and tolerates women only because they minister to convenience; or perhaps because they made themselves or were made by an unhappy accident? Men have had their try at making the world for a good many centuries now; the age of brute force is done; it is the turn of the women; their era is coming; you are helping it on. Don't deceive yourself! They will fight to the death. Don't be led aside by sentiment! Human relationships are possibly purely accidental. Anyhow,



there's a rule that you profess to follow: 'He who loveth father or mother more than me is not worthy.' You and I will work well together. You have many things to learn, and as many to unlearn. But you can stay on in London now; we have baffled the forces of evil and superstition for this time."

And Madame Renner? Personal fascination is and was a part of her stock-in-trade. Surely it is a part that may most legitimately be employed, and that is often employed on much less worthy business. She saw, as we all did, character and intellect in the raw country girl then standing before her so awkwardly. She must, with her quick eyes, have seen at a glance that she had lighted on a personality capable of doing credit to the cause which Madame and the rest of us serve. And at once, by a powerful and all-prevailing method, Miss Vassie was sworn in among Madame Renner's adherents. Devoted adherents, though they be humble, are of value to a lonely woman, who has already seen a few admirers, not humble, turn into bitter foes. And the steady toil of editing a paper, even one that is going to fail, may well be lightened by the applied energy of a young woman, who thinks the meanest drudgery in the cause of literature an honour, and who is glad of the smallest reward for long and toilsome services.

Tabitha Vassie walked home with her eyes glistening and her eyes throbbing. She laid her early manuscripts on the fire. She did not want any lingering evidences of her ignorant period. She knew many things that she had not known this morning. And she remembered how evil transforms itself into good; how, if Benscote had not refused to give her that ten pounds for furnishing, she would never have gone to Madame Renner to beg for work on the *Patriot*. Even I



remember with some glee that this friendship was begun as a direct consequence of Mr. and Mrs. Vassie's well-meant but ill-advised action.

Madame Renner, who thus played the part of a Good Samaritan, was not, I suppose, further apart from Mrs. Vassie's ideas of orthodoxy than was her prototype in the old story from the priest and the Levite. I take it for granted that the man who fell among thieves was ever after (in spite of our being left without evidence as to his previous opinions) kindly disposed towards the heresies of the Samaritan faith; although, in those far-away days, faith and morality were not bound up very closely in the popular mind, as we see them now. It is impossible to separate our judgment on a strange creed from our experience of its followers. Tabitha, rescued from poverty, and with another avenue to success opened before her, was greatly inclined to think kindly of Madame's heresies, social and religious, so far as she understood them, which was not far. I deprecate the notion that if you feed a starving man, and then make a convert of him, you necessarily bribe a hypocrite. Far from it! Your convert is sure of one good thing about the members of your faith, and one bad thing about the members of the faith he has deserted. His late co-religionists let him starve; you pitied the unfortunate and fed the hungry. And surely these are fruits of a true religion that we all may point to in evidence?

Mrs. Laslett sent to Tabitha an invitation to dine on the following Sunday; but she was under an engagement to work with Madame Renner: was it likely that she would postpone such a chance? Mrs. Laslett is much like other people; Tabitha knew exactly what would happen in her house: Madame Renner was something new and fresh, and altogether adorable. It

was impossible that Tabitha should spend an afternoon in her company and not come away stored with new ideas, possessed of greater power of sub-editing a newspaper of advanced views.

As the weeks went on Mrs. Vassie's warning voice made itself heard: Tabitha must not get vain; it was good to edit a paper, but she must call to mind how many wiser persons and papers there were in the world; she must be grateful to this foreign lady who was so kind to her, and whose writings Mrs. Vassie would like to see.

Tabitha never sent *The Woman Patriot* to Benscote, an omission that was attributed to a natural shyness about her own compositions. That Tabitha had written was known at Benscote, but none of them had spoken to her freely on the subject; and they would as soon have asked to see what she had finished as have read her private letters or turned out her pocket. Imaginative literature was an art they never so much as dreamed of. Mrs. Vassie had, I suppose, never formulated her opinion, not knowing that a contrary one may be held. She took all writings to be human documents; and if she had read anything Tabitha had written, would have tried instinctively to label her characters and even her ideas with the names of people in and about Benscote—herself, the girls, the vicar. There was in truth a strong human element in the writings of the editress of *The Woman Patriot*, who wrote of the wrongs of women with a pen often dipped in gall, and who mistook her own sad experiences in and out of matrimony for a sample of the common lot.

## CHAPTER XXII

### ON ABSTINENCE

Writing for *The Woman Patriot* never meant a fat living. And the salary of the secretary of the Madeline is (so I have at length determined) fixed by the Committee, sincerest friends of women, at a very low rate, in order that the secretary may have no difficulty in sympathizing actively with the struggles of the poorer members, among whom Miss Vassie's popularity rapidly grew.

Two rooms and a cupboard cannot be furnished on nothing at all, and money owing, to a friend or to a dealer, must be paid. Such accounts need careful reckoning. Miss Vassie's days and nights were otherwise filled; it had become her habit to reckon her expenditure as she ate her breakfast, hers not being those ample meals that call for the eater's undivided attention. She made herself a cup of tea, cut some slices of bread, and adjudged thereto a portion of butter. When she had eaten it and put the things away, she was going out to her day's work. It was a meager meal; and I have no desire that pity should be withheld from my heroine; only that it should be freely poured upon her after and not before reflection upon the proportion of the hard work of the world done by women whose breakfast is scantier and whose dinner is yet more uncertain. At least one other woman, poorer than Tabitha, rose in the early morning to sweep down Tabitha's stairs and to black her grate.

At least Tabitha found a bit of fire ablaze on cold mornings to greet her. At least Tabitha looked on this condition as a means to a glorious end, and not as the end to which she was born.

She ate her bit of toast, making a pattern above her plate with the contents of her purse. The pattern was not a handsome one. Then she rang the housekeeper's bell. "I shall not be home to dinner," she said. "I will get my dinner out; and I will bring in something for supper." The woman to whom she spoke had seen better days, and knew the value of polite fictions. Not less firmly than Tabitha's mother she believed in the law of status, by the operation of which she ought to have had a house of her own and a pound or so a week to spend; instead of which the shop where she had put her capital failed, and here she was, drudge in a block, at the beck and call of the ladies who lodged above her. She had a standing grudge against Providence. But if you have no big things to be grateful for you need not forget the small: she approved of Miss Vassie's habit of dining out; it seemed a providential arrangement to enable her to get dressed earlier in the afternoon.

Possibly she knew that Miss Vassie did not return at the dinner hour when her funds were low; she had told that same pious tale herself in the good old days when she paid for her own crust, and began it at the end she chose. But she envied Miss Vassie, who was free to go and come as she liked; who was not harried by lodgers and a mistress; and who was young. To a woman whose years and chances lie behind her, that means everything. She could have told you that to go hungry is not the worst affliction especially when you get used to it.

And now I think I hear knowing readers exclaim



that Tabitha Vassie was little better than a fool. Had she not learned by this time that dinner in your home costs a lot less than dinner out? I can even imagine that they reason on a step further, and point a moral: this is what happens (say they) with your strong-minded working woman; she flies her home, and would rather be anywhere than there, even at the moment of a semi-sacred ceremony like a proper dinner. Imagine a woman who pretends to be poor, paying rent and wages and kitchen fire at a restaurant when she could have enjoyed all these things at home for nothing!

But I have made no mention of a restaurant. And to go without a thing always costs (at the moment) less than to buy it of the cheapest variety. And a bun, especially when you have gone through a long course of buns, is so satisfying a food, that it is possible to feel as if you had had enough after the expenditure of one penny. What dinner at home can vie with that for cheapness? And (supposing Miss Vassie to allow herself sixpence for dinner) there is fivepence saved towards the cost of that new book without which it is impossible to follow with full advantage the classes that are to fit her for her future brilliant career. Is it not well worth while? Tabitha feels sure that her perseverance, coupled with the cleverness that has always been laid to her discredit, makes of the brilliant career a certainty. For such a guerdon who would not pay such a price? And Nature is kind; after working and thinking all day on the bun, a girl at six o'clock at night may not feel hungrier than if she had eaten at mid-day her fill of beef and potatoes. Nature has wonderful compensations. If I were not ashamed to indulge in so much moralizing, I might wander off into reflections pages long upon so fruitful a text.

Nor can the matter, from any point of view, be dis-



posed of summarily. Even when the buns were drier than usual, even when her appetite craved a fuller satisfaction—say, on a wet day, or a cold, or when a neighbouring customer, between an abundant breakfast and a superabundant dinner, consumed a lunch of an attractive kind—Tabitha was happy in her heart. There was not a customer she would have changed places with. For she had found out by experience a great many truths that are unknown to the majority whom you meet at a tea-party. Old-world writers tell us that to starve the appetites feeds the soul. And if Tabitha had held to the place where she was born she would have heard that saying many a time and oft, but she never would have known what it meant. Here was an obvious application. The appetite for food, and a good deal of it, and of the best, belongs to girls of Tabitha's class. Do they ever starve it? Does it occur to them or to their mothers that it might be well to do so now and again? Not a bit of it. They think the saying—so far as it is true at all—applies to the starvation of appetites which they do not possess, and to conditions under which they do not live. They have heard, on the other hand, that the natural appetite of a girl should be gratified to the full. Perhaps they are right. They worship their own bodies, and the object of their care and adoration does them manifest credit. But let them never suppose that anything in this world is to be had without paying for it. The world would indeed be an unfair place if we could have our cake and eat it; or let the cake lie and still groan under a surfeit. They have fed their bodies; and we can only hope that they have not—well! starved their souls, is what the old divines would have said. We know what they meant, and mean the same thing, but are trammelled by fashion in the use of words. In Tabitha Vassie's young

days it was not the fashion to believe in a soul, and certainly not to talk about one when you set up for a philosopher.

Tabitha Vassie was learning what is the worth of things, and how little the things that you can buy with money have to do with happiness. In short, she was growing into what may be described as a strong-minded woman; her mind was certainly the part of her to make itself first felt; had conquered her body, or was in the way to. Bodily pain and discomfort, though they presented themselves under no noble disguise, had lost most of their power over the essential Tabitha. She had seen the fading at close quarters of so many terrible bogies that she was no longer easy to frighten. She knew poverty well, that most terrifying of all bogies to the modern mind; it did not look unlike a friend. She had tasted hunger, and had, while it gnawed her, bent in absorbing interest over her books, or looked forward in rapture to the growth of a new idea in the world. She had faced opposition, and had found that a good conscience is sometimes to be had without the accompaniment of any man's praise. She had lived alone, and had tried her strength against the forces of society and nature. She had thought clearly because she had felt keenly. She was taking her own measure; a long and laborious process, fully accomplished but by few in this short life. And she was growing stronger daily, was less easily overcome by any manner of bribe or terror; wiser in judgment too, a woman whose opinion many sought and a few followed; gathering a fund of knowledge about common affairs and commonplace troubles, of which the burden still lay on her slender back.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LEAST OF THE LITTLE ONES

And now I turn to another phase of Tabitha Vassie's life, where I think we may find some explanation of much that afterwards befell her. She was happy at last. In all her life she had never been so happy before. And she had been brought up to think that happiness was a grudging gift to womankind; that though women should toil unceasingly to procure it for their menkind, they had no right to it for themselves, and that if they had it they should pay heavy toll. Tabitha's tender conscience was further pricked by the remembrance that she had gained her present happiness by doing exactly those things which, according to the authorities, should have landed her in misery. And lest her unassisted conscience should not suffice to awaken her to a due sense of her debts to the world, Mrs. Vassie constantly wrote about the matter.

"You have taken your own way; you have shaken yourself free from all duties" (I quote from a letter picked at random); "it is a dangerous thing for a girl to do. I hope you will not become selfish, and that you will not devote the whole of your thoughts to making yourself comfortable. A selfish woman is a terrible thing. A woman's duty is to make those around her happy. Mary tells me that you are constantly writing for this paper, besides the secretaryship, and that you have everything that a girl can possibly want. You have had so much done for you that I hope

you will not forget to do all you can for your younger brothers and sisters, and for those who are less fortunate than yourself. Geoffrey tells me he came to see you last week with a friend, and that you gave them a very nice little dinner, and made him very comfortable. I am so glad to hear this. I hope he will see you often. It is lonely for a boy in London; and a boy who is not happy is so tempted to get into mischief."

The main purport of this letter fell in, I cannot doubt, with Tabitha's thoughts: through life it had been impressed upon her that girls could put up with things, but that boys could not, and her experience had gone to confirm the statement. She did indeed reflect that boys may be poor sort of creatures, since with double a girl's chances they are so much more than she at the mercy of material things. Even at Miss Meal's, it had not occurred to Tabitha, nor to any one of the young ladies, to "get into mischief." But we are all disposed to take for granted the truth of a proposition that is positively asserted by persons of otherwise opposite opinions; and Tabitha had lived of late among women who accepted precisely Mrs. Vassie's view of the moral feebleness of men-folk, though they accounted for this opinion by no theory of inherent male superiority.

She did not, nevertheless, press invitations upon Geoffrey and his friends, whose dinners were paid for at their ordinary place of abode, and who did not pretend to think it worth while to come so far to see Miss Vassie, unless she would feed them when they got there. And Tabitha had learned to think of dinner, in its relation to actual hunger, as a bare fact, unclothed with any social or æsthetic trappings. To do the lads justice, they had always money in their pocket, and it never occurred to them that "for men



in their position" there could be any reason against paying for one dinner and then eating another. "We're not come down to that!" they would have declared stoutly, for they, too, believed in the fixed union between a certain income to spend, and a certain position to keep up.

For other reasons Geoffrey was not very anxious to visit Tabitha too often. He liked better to go to the Lasletts' or to help Mrs. Goodhurst to muster a due supply of presentable men at the Cinderella dances that she had began again as soon as the conventionalities, easily interpreted, allowed them to be possible.

*The Woman Patriot* could be ordered, but was not found without notice, at the nearest news-agent's; and information (more or less accurate) as to the standing of that paper in literary and commercial circles might be had gratis from fellow-students having relations (more or less distant) with the writing world. Geoffrey soon had misgivings as to the grandeur of Tabitha's literary attainments; not that he set up to be a judge of style, but that he had found out what are the usual payments in cash for such work as hers. He ceased to talk about his sister who wrote, and was even less anxious than Tabitha to enlarge in home letters upon the reputed standing of *The Woman Patriot*. Behind all this elaborate reasoning and calculation of main chance was no inkling of the truth about Tabitha's poverty. In the prosecution of his studies he had enough new things to learn without building new foundations of social faith. He had always heard it said at Benscote, he had always been taught that "women manage"; he did not know how, but he supposed Tabitha "managed," as in point of fact she did.

But, though Tabitha had not thrown off her beliefs about the advisability of making men and boys com-



fortable if you wish them to follow your conscience, she had learned from an experience that lay deeper than any opinions, that women and girls often fail for want of a home, of money, of food, and sisterly sympathy. True, she had not already for herself as much of these excellent things as would have been good for her; but she remembered only that she had much more than many, much more than heretofore. It was, therefore, she held with Mrs. Vassie, her bounden duty to share her benefits with neighbours less fortunate than herself. She went her way with open hand and heart; and many of the club members finished by Miss Vassie's fireside the tales of struggle and disappointment that they had begun in the less sympathetic quarters of the Madeline.

Very beautiful! Showing a true woman's heart! Yet I have thought sometimes that Tabitha would have done well to keep for herself the whole of her short time and shorter commons. It is a difficult question. Many have told me since that they date their first spring upwards from contact with Tabitha Vassie's unselfish, brave spirit. Besides, she deemed it her duty to give away a part of what was not enough for herself; and we all believe that it is of comparatively little service to give what costs us nothing. The bare merits of the case are, moreover, in this place uninteresting. I only tell what Miss Vassie did, making you see (or so I hope) that, being herself, she could not have done anything else.

Here is the question as it appeared one out of many times in concrete form.

Tabitha Vassie was sitting in her window on a Saturday afternoon catching the last rays of light as they filtered down past chimneys and roofs and brick walls before she sat down to supper. There were books and

papers on her knee. She was writing for *The Woman Patriot* an article on "Successful Women." It was a subject that commended itself to her. Her fingers were inky and her hair was rough and she had put on her oldest frock when she came in an hour ago to spend her busy evening. This had been a dinnerless day, but she was hungry to-night; she might safely be, for a check had come in that morning in payment for some work she had done, and it was a few shillings more than she had reckoned upon; so the housekeeper's drudge had set a hot chop upon her tea-table, and some fried potatoes. Then the bell rang. "Nobody for me!" said Tabitha aloud. "So much the better!"

But there was a running footfall on the narrow passage, and a pinched, shabby-looking woman, about Miss Vassie's age, came quickly in. She looked round at the door before she took Tabitha's welcoming hand. It was the gesture of a hunted outlaw reaching sanctuary.

"Ah, Miss Attingshall!" said Tabitha. "And how is the world using you? I have seen you so seldom since I left Miss Meal's."

The new-comer held Tabitha's hand and glanced round fearfully. "I've so much to tell you," she said. "Are you sure that no one can hear? I've come to ask your advice. I thought I might find you at home now. But I don't want to keep you from your supper. I'll tell you while you go on. I don't think I can stand it any more. Go on—do go on—or I shall go away."

Tabitha drew her arm-chair to the fire. "Take off your cloak, and put on dry shoes and get warm," she said. "Things don't seem so impossible when one is warm—I know it of old. Your cloak's thin; and everything seems so hard to bear just at first when one is cold. And then have something to eat with me,

and you shall tell me as we go on, or afterwards. I need not go out to-night."

"No, I don't want anything to eat," said the girl. "It's too bad of me to come like this and eat up your supper. But I always feel better when I tell you all about it. And you are never frightened like I am. I'll just have a piece of bread and a cup of tea."

Tabitha laughed. "Nonsense! I shan't let you have anything unless you share and share alike as comrades should. I got something to eat out to-day at lunch-time. I don't always. Now then!" She put a chair at the warmest corner, and cut the large half of the meat for her friend. But because one is generous there is no need to be wasteful, and gravy is better than nothing. "If you won't be shocked, I'll take the dish. It will save ringing again."

"Are you sure you had your dinner in the middle of the day?" said the girl, looking at her plate and hesitating.

Tabitha smiled. "You'd better begin while it's hot," she said. "I like to have company at meals. Supper alone is a melancholy feast. And I must have known in my heart that you were coming, for I bought a cake."

The visitor needed no further bidding. She cleared her plate, looked up to see if there were more, then laid down her knife and fork. "I don't mind telling you, Miss Vassie; but I've had nothing to eat worth speaking of all day. It's the life of a slave that I lead. And no one is ever kind to me. I've nothing that any girl could possibly care to have."

"What's been happening? What are you doing now?" asked Tabitha.

"I'm teaching music, you know, like I always did," she said; "I teach at a school; they call it a Kinder-

garten, but they take children when they can get them, and keep them as long as they can. They pay me eighteen pounds a year, and that's every penny I have to live upon."

"Why don't you pluck up courage and complain?" said Tabitha.

The girl began to whimper.

"It's all very well to talk about courage; but when you haven't enough to eat, you don't feel as if you had spirit for anything. I wish I hadn't told you now. You'll go and make a fuss, and then I shall be sent away. I must go grinding on; and I'm miserable, miserable. I shall die. I know I shall die." The whimper had fallen into heartbroken sobs. She had sunk down on the hearthrug, resting her head on a chair.

"Poor child!" said Tabitha, gently, though indeed they were much of an age. "You poor child! It is very hard."

"Hard! That is not nearly bad enough name for it. When I go to my uncle's they tell me I ought to submit to the will of God, and be content, and that everything is ordered for the best. How can I be content when I'm so miserable, and haven't enough to eat? Why should anybody be content when other people are more miserable and more starving than I am? They're content enough; they have a good dinner every day, though they know we are so hungry. It's absurd; I'm not content at all. God can't mean that if He cares one bit. And if He doesn't care, why should I try and be content more than I am to please Him? I told my aunt so one day; and she said I was 'touched with the infidelity of the age.' But they don't say such things to you, and if they did you would not care; you are so strong-minded, Miss Vassie."

"I don't know about caring," said Miss Vassie, sadly.



"Perhaps I care more than they think, but the only way to make them leave off is to try not to wince nor to let them see that one cares. Perhaps they believe it. Many people tell lies, but only a few tell them on purpose. You can no more alter them than the weather. Women who've lived at home all their lives, comfortable, have a sort of notion that in London wickedness flourishes; and they don't know much about wickedness, except what they call unbelief, so they think London must be full of that."

Miss Vassie's visitor had risen, dried her tears, and was looking at her tear-stained face in the glass. "Sometimes," she said, "sometimes I think I shall do all the wicked things they expect of me. It seems a pity to disappoint them; and there's one woman who's very kind to me and who's got me work and often had me to her house; she says marrying and all that is a mistake; things would be much better without it. There's a gentleman who says I should look ever so pretty if I had nice clothes, and if I'd some one to take care of me. He's not bad-looking. If Miss Driver sent me away, I should go and tell him. I know where he lives."

"Don't be silly!" said Tabitha, alarmed. "You shouldn't talk about such things. You know you don't mean it. Go and do your duty. It will all come right in the end. And the less you have to do with a woman who talks to you like that the better."

"That's all very well," said she. "She's very kind to me, a great deal kinder than the others, and cares a lot more for my good. And it's such a long time to wait. I want something nice now. It's all very well for you, Miss Vassie; but then you're so strong and so clever. You can afford to tell them what you think. It's easier for clever people to be good,"



Tabitha, in spite of a sore heart, smiled. "I haven't always been told so," she said.

And then, as she looked on the lined, fair, faded face, a righteous wrath rose within her against a society that could rear a creature so unfit for making her own way in the world, and then thrust her out alone to work under the reign of terror. Her hardships were blessings by the side of this weak sister's; and as for hard words, Tabitha had schooled herself in the faith that it is a bad cause which needs to be fortified by such means. But this poor little thing had been in that school of adversity where greed and selfishness govern, and there no blessing falls upon the scholars. Heaven send that Tabitha and others of her mind might make life easier for these weak sisters!

"It is very cruel!" she said at last. "But it is no good to think about it. Life has only to be lived in bits. Stay here to-night, and to-morrow try and put up with things, and come round again and see me. There is always a welcome. See! Shall we make a bargain? I'm always at home on Thursdays; will you come every Thursday and have supper with me?"

"You don't really want me," said the girl, with a questioning smile on her face. "But if you expected me, it would be better than if I came and ate half your supper? And it does me good to talk to you."

"Yes; I do want you. What would this world be if we women did not stick to one another, we who have so many to find fault with us? Thursday, then; every Thursday at six o'clock? And then we'll tell our troubles, and work off the steam, so as to be able to bear things when they come next morning."

Tabitha had intended to buy for herself several luxuries with the unexpected few shillings, but she reflected that they would do well to pay for the Thurs-

day suppers, and with due economy would last some weeks. And then, anxious lest she should, even in thought, claim undue credit for so necessary an action, she said to herself that one more good supper a week would, no doubt, be good for her also, and might cure those faintnesses of body and mind that she had hitherto persisted in attributing to the weather. When it is inconvenient to remove a trouble, it saves searchings of conscience to lay it to the score of some irremediable cause.

The small fair head lay quiet on Tabitha's pillow, and Tabitha wrote on through the smallest hours. The clock struck three. Very softly she opened the door and crept in to get some things that she needed. The girl lay flat on her back, in a pose of utter exhaustion, and her face was so pinched and thin, and her skin so transparent that she looked as though she lay dead. She neither moved nor stirred as Tabitha came in; and the lines had left her forehead, and the fretful anxiety had been loosened into reposeful confidence, as often in the face of the dead; as though she had indeed passed from under the reign of terror and found on the other side of death secure protection.

So Tabitha Vassie had her reward; the best of all rewards in the world, and fairly earned. In her clasp lay a hand too small and feeble to reach straight up to the Almighty, and Tabitha's own right hand gripped hold of the Eternal Verities.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE HEART OF A NUN

Every one who has the pleasure of Madame Renner's acquaintance acknowledges that she can be a most agreeable and inspiring companion. And even those who, having enjoyed her friendship, have lost it (so they all say) through no fault of their own, look back with sincere regret on their past privilege, and allow that you cannot expect Madame Renner to behave exactly like all the rest of this tame world, and that they now wish they had been more forgiving and less hasty.

Still, while friendship lasts, each party thereto is apt to believe that it will last forever; and that therein will be found, not only those strange, rare, and obvious qualities which make this friend's society so stimulating; but also the direct opposites of those qualities, highly desirable when one is playing the game of life according to the rules of commonplace intercourse.

At most times during Madame Renner's career, she has had attached to her, and frequently to be seen in her company, one or more young women; sometimes, but at rare intervals, one or two or a posse of young men; and though they came and went, leaving others to take their place, and seldom returning for a second spell of friendship, they have none of them, so far as I can judge, shaken themselves free of Madame's permanent influence on their lives. Of course she did not intend that they should ever do so. The pleasure of

the intercourse could scarcely have been to her a sufficient payment for all the trouble that she took on their behalf; rather she looked for her reward to the quicker spread and speedier triumph of those principles which should make of society a kingdom of righteousness—and of Madame Renner an acknowledged leader.

The influence of Madame Renner on these young persons, though it has fallen far short of her imagined idea, has been for good, or at least for success—the world's measure of good, though not yours nor mine. It would be surprising if I could write here a list of those persons whom she has, to my knowledge, thus influenced and guided; so successful have they been, so much more successful than Madame herself, whose name conveys no familiar impression to the majority.

Miss Vassie was fortunate, in that she entered Madame Renner's life at a moment when the interest in her was not shared. There was a gaping vacancy, not only on the staff of *The Woman Patriot*, but also in the editorial heart. So far as I can fit dates, I fancy that Madame had recently suffered under grievous disappointment in her dealings with her friends, and that the whole force of her nature fell on Miss Vassie at a rebound.

Be that as it may, Miss Vassie began by spending her half-holiday afternoons, and presently her Sundays, in the crowded front sitting-room, half-office, half-parlour; and it was not many weeks before, on each arrival she took her place at once and as a matter of course before the strewn desk; and there, at first wielding scissors and daubing paste, afterwards exercising sharpened literary talent and judgment, she began to put together the material that at the end of the week instructed us all in the columns of *The Woman Patriot*. It was noticed by many, about that time, or a little

later, that the letterpress in the *Patriot* became stiffer, but less "rabid"—to quote the prevalent word; and that the foreign news relating to the progress of the woman's movement was really well and adequately done.

As for Miss Vassie, in the first flush of her enthusiastic admiration, she doubtless felt convinced that all her previous existence, all her study of tongues, even all Hilda's wandering childhood where knowledge was gathered to Tabitha's profit, were meant to lead up to this end; all found a full justification and meaning in ministering, ever so humbly, to Madame Renner's glory and renown.

In such a frame of mind women learn quickly; in the hot flame of a girl's enthusiasm results are rapid; old prejudices are broken down, life-long tastes are modified; while old powers grow stronger and new powers advance to the front.

Nor was Miss Vassie one of those admirers who need for continuance of their feelings any inordinate amount of attention, or even the perpetual presence of the beloved object. Madame Renner found that Miss Vassie could be trusted to put forward her best strength, more especially when her employer was at the other end of London or of England, engaged in one of the many fascinating pursuits that divided her interests and helped to replenish her purse, often empty in spite of her multifarious activities and talents.

Miss Vassie, in her spare moments (I have not the slightest idea where she found them), gained a reading acquaintance with Italian, and soon thereafter appeared in the *Patriot* some highly apposite cuttings from a Swedish newspaper, translated, so good authorities said, with accuracy, and with a remarkable appreciation of the main points of the case.

On the one occasion when I paid a business call



upon Madame Renner on the day devoted to the production and final arrangement of the week's issue of the paper, Miss Vassie was alone; even when, presently, an irate and touzled contributor came to demand prompt payment, no Madame Renner appeared. It was Miss Vassie who met the fiery arguments, and who, in a creditably short space of time, had politely shown a civil though unpaid person to the front door. Miss Vassie was so well convinced of the righteousness of Madame and of her paper, and of the full face value of the credit note presented that she actually converted her visitor to her own view of the subject.

And when the creditor (who aspires to become a writer of fiction, and prides herself, like the rest of us, on her knowledge of character loudly declared—"You get your own money, I suppose; and you're like the rest of them; you don't care for anything else!" she was speedily ashamed, as could be seen by her looks, though she got no direct answer; so ill had she, a professional ascriber of motives, made her fancy description fit the appearance and behaviour of the person described.

As for the money part of the transaction between Madame Renner and her subordinate, I have reason to believe that the weekly sum agreed upon between them was small, but regularly paid; and that with one employment and another, Tabitha earned enough, but only just enough, to pay for her two rooms and the cupboard in the block, and to keep herself according to a very moderate standard of comfort.

In Madame's frequent absences, a sincere, though calm and reasonable friendship was struck up between Miss Vassie and Madame Renner's mother, an old lady greedy of admiration for her handsome daughter, and sufficiently alive to that daughter's shortcomings to

perceive that Miss Vassie was likely to prove a friend of more than average usefulness.

And it was during one of Madame Renner's absences that Miss Vassie, looking in on an extra occasion, after her day's work at the club was done, found, in Madame Renner's favourite chair, sitting much at ease amid such clouds of smoke that Tabitha was seized with an untimely coughing fit, a tall, dark, handsome man, with something of Madame Renner's careless grace, and with much of her power of moving harmlessly, even in moments of apparent abandonment, among woman's trifles and woman's litter, in a small place. His shoulders should have been squarer; Madame's (to gain popular admiration) more sloping.

"This is my son, my dear; my only son," said the old lady, and she laid a hand on his arm and looked proudly out. This is Miss Vassie, of whom you have heard me and Elsa speak; Elsa's good helper and friend. She has come back to do some work for Elsa now, on account of Elsa being so busy this week with the concert. And he has come back to me from beyond the sea, just to gladden my old eyes once more. But I must not wait. I must be getting things ready. Or I shall be hindering you, and Albert will be running away, because his old mother does not give him anything to eat."

There the work waited to be done. Miss Vassie sat down in her accustomed place before the desk. Mr. Albert Willan watched her, having thrown his cigar into the grate. And Tabitha wished with all her heart that he would go away; for she did not find it easy to concentrate herself on the French aspect of the woman question when, whether she wrote a sentence or stared out of the window for inspiration, biting her pen-end,

a pair of dark eyes remained fixed on her in undisguised amusement.

"Do you like jackalling for Elsa—my sister?" he asked at the close of a long burst of inspiration.

"Jackalling? Working? Yes, if that's what you mean, very much," said Miss Vassie shortly. And she stared at the ceiling, searching out the precise equivalent of a bit of French journalese.

"Oughtn't I to help? What is it? Spanish, Italian? Russian, except a smattering is beyond me. Diatribes against us men? I'm not so bad a hand, even at that. And I write *con amore*, knowing our deserts."

"Indeed!" said Miss Vassie primly, because she had lived a decade at Benscote for every ten months in London, and at Benscote it is said to take many years instead of many months to get on joking terms with a man. "You make a mistake; it is only French."

She took up the newspaper from which she was translating, and pretended, pointing with her pen, to be closely following a phrase—which, in point of fact, she already knew by heart.

"What would happen if it were mistranslated? I take it that the consequences, of one sort or another, would be enormous."

"The consequences to me—yes," said Tabitha. "I shouldn't have done my best."

She scribbled hastily a few lines in conclusion, folded her paper and rose, holding her hat in her hand. Generally she put it on and pinned it in the sitting-room; but it scarcely seemed a decent action before a quite strange man.

"Finished? So soon? My mother said you would not be done for another hour. She is going to bring you some tea."

"I don't want tea," said Miss Vassie. "I never have tea."

"Not when Elsa rules? Elsa is made of cast-iron. She never thinks anyone may be more tired than she."

"There's nobody like her," said Miss Vassie. "I've often seen her tired."

"Just so. No one like her, iron and all. The iron is to be felt when you come into opposition. But we are, no doubt, in hearty agreement that a woman should have a mind of her own. That is why we love Elsa. There is but one better woman, and that is the mother."

"One always feels at home where she is," said Miss Vassie, thawing, and thinking how agreeable it was of this handsome son, who knew so many languages, to love so dearly his plain old mother, who had striven for him since he was born.

Mrs. Willan came in, bringing two cups of tea, with two bits of bread-and-butter, and two cakes. Miss Vassie stood to drink hers in haste. A sitting-down, *tête-à-tête* tea with a strange man was outside her standard of propriety. It would only have been worse, she thought, had she been expected to sit down before a teapot and pour out for him, asking him whether he wanted milk and sugar, and such-like intimate details.

With her cup in her hand, she could turn her back on his embarrassing presence to thank Mrs. Willan, and to give some message for Madame Renner. "None for yourself, little mother!" said Willan.

"I'll have mine presently," she said. "Do you drink it while it's hot."

He took the tray from her, and with his hands on her shoulders, forced her, unresisting, into a chair. "There's a cup for you, and I'll fetch a cup for me. May I have a cake too?"



"You'll never find it, my dear," she said fondly. "Best let me go."

"Never fear. Do you 'think I always carry a mother with me to make my tea? No such luck."

When he returned with a tray and tea and cake set out in neatest fashion, Miss Vassie had sat down.

"And now," said Mr. Willan, "we'll drop business and talk agreeably. Please forgive me for belonging to the inimical sex. I didn't plan that out. And tell me—are you any relation to the Miss Vassie who married my friend Fewell?"

Miss Vassie drew in her breath quickly, and her eyes lighted. Now that Mrs. Willan was present she had ceased to be troubled by reminiscence of Benscote codes. And she knew so few men that an acquaintance of her brother-in-law stepped at once into her small private circle.

"There was a Mr. Willan at the wedding," she said. "I wasn't there, but I heard about it. I never thought of its being the same."

Mrs. Willan set her cup down with a click. "There now!" she said. "To think of that!" She had seen enough people in the world to know that Miss Vassie differed widely from the most of her daughter's admirers. She knew that Elsa inveighed against Miss Vassie's relations, because they were rich people, and yet neglected her. She remembered that her son had told her of the wedding in a fine country house. When her son and daughter visited in houses where she was not received, she felt keen pleasure, and believed that fortune was returning to the Willans in a rush. "To think! Just to think!" She did think, forwards and back.

"I knew Fewell years ago, when he was out in Odessa on business. We travelled up country together,



and he's pleased to think he owes me a good turn. Good man to travel with. Always knows by instinct which side his bread is buttered."

"What did you do for him?" asked Miss Vassie, frankly curious.

"Empty house. Brigands. Dead of night. Quite a romantic tale, especially where my grand actions come in. They're pure romance. I performed negative heroics in consequence of a toothache. I did not go to sleep. Does Fewell never tell you travellers' tales?"

"I scarcely ever go inside his house," said Tabitha, drawing out all her inches. "He does not approve of me. I might be catching, like the plague, you know."

"Let me bare my heart, and say what I daren't say before, that I was never extravagantly fond of Fewell myself. They say you never are fond of a man you've put under an obligation. Not that I allow I did save his life. That's his version. Now we are so far in agreement, aren't we?"

"Ernest Fewell is a man I never think of unless I see him," said Miss Vassie. "And then sometimes—I wish he weren't there."

"Bare truth this time." Mr. Willan laughed. "Pretty place, Ransham and Benscote too. Fewell's a lucky fellow to end his days of wandering."

"He doesn't wander much now. He lives tied to my sister's apron-string. I believe he orders the nursery puddings. No accounting for taste. I don't know why I should object if it pleases them."

"I can most readily account for Fewell's taste. I have a vivid remembrance of a very charming bride."

"I heard Ada looked pretty."

"I heard all about it when he came home," said the

old lady. "And to think I never put two and two together!"

"I thought you lived abroad always," said Tabitha.

"I come home for flying visits, bringing mixed sensations of joy and grief to the family circle. The fact is I'm a ne'er-do-weel, a rolling stone."

"You never bring any grief to me, my dear boy, and you never will, except to think you're unfortunate. But we know, Miss Vassie and I, that the best men and the cleverest are often the most unfortunate."

Italian studies made no progress that evening, because Miss Vassie's thoughts, instead of fixing themselves upon the interesting page, were gone travelling back to Madame Renner's house. I find it hard to guess exactly what she found to think about so long in such a commonplace view.

But the interest of a performance of the kind is apt to be in direct proportion to its rarity. I can imagine a cloistered nun, grievously disturbed in her mind, and agitated during her most pious devotions, because she had caught at a distance, an accidental glimpse of the back of a man's head. I have observed that a school-girl's spirit may be perturbed by half-a-dozen words spoken in careless courtesy by a very average gentleman. And age has not much to do with the matter; for at any age, the first time an acquaintance of an evening puts on a cloak in the hall, there usually remains on one or two minds the impression of something of an event.

And when I remember the Vassies' quiet life at Benscote, and know that one may live the life of a cloistered nun even in the heart of a great city, I am only the more persuaded that Tabitha's upbringing was in no way fitted to be a convenient prelude to Tabitha's life; and that, mercifully for us all, time

causes custom and opinion to grow, and growing to change. There are dangers besetting every path; but while many make it their pleasure to speak of and even to exaggerate the pitfalls placed on the path of women's freedom, few take due account of the snares set during a life of restraint.

Mr. Albert Willan, who was at a loose end at that time, wrote before the week was out to his old friend and travelling companion at Ransham Lodge; and Tabitha filled her next Benscote letter with questions about Mr. Willan, and reminders of all the agreeable compliments that had been paid to her dear Madame Renner's brother, the handsome and talkative guest at the wedding—that one historical event of which the scene had, since the commencement of Tabitha's public life, been laid at Benscote Manor.

## CHAPTER XXV

### A CHANCE OF RECONCILIATION

Tabitha was ill. Small wonder, considering the life she had led for more than two years. And when she had been away from her work for four days, Miss Sawday came to see her where she lay alone. Madame Renner sent ample apologies and a sheaf of excuses; she had some new business on hand and was going out of town to see to it; and among the many subjects of her keen interests and affection, sick persons do not find much space. Miss Vassie's next visitor was a doctor, a well-known man, who doctored lonely girls gratis, and gave them, in such doses as he thought they could support, his own views on social matters in general and the woman question in particular. Tabitha was past help from views, save and except his views on the nature and cure of her complaint. I shall not come back to him again, so here is the place to say that his views, like those of so many of Tabitha's helpers, were nothing less than abhorrent to Mrs. Vassie, or would have been had she heard them set forth. He was not long in discovering the cause of Tabitha's illness; indeed the cause is (or was) so common as to be the first thought of. And as the likeliest step towards a fundamental cure he saw Miss Sawday again.

Tabitha, lying lonely and racked with pain, with nothing save her misery and the doctor in her mind, thought how good he was, and how clever, for already she felt a little better; and how people said that he was an atheist, and must be mistaken, for if not, atheists could ill be spared out of this suffering world.

"Who is this Miss Vassie? And who are her people? Are they poverty-stricken too? Or is the girl alone in the world? Some one must look after her, or I cannot tell what will be the end. She has been underfed and overworked, and, I suspect, half worried to death besides. I know the ways of girls of her build. She is in a high fever. And she's lying there alone at the top of that great building, with not a creature to look after her. The girl who lives opposite can't leave her work; and if she did, she's not much good at the job. She has a throat that I don't like the look of. Her people, if she has any, should be written to. If not, some of us must interfere. She is too good to lose out of the world."

"Most certainly, yes; she has people well-to-do; and a father and mother living where I was born. But they are above our set; I am not on calling terms with them." Miss Sawday smiled. "Still, I will see. They are good sort of people in their own narrow way. They will not wish that any harm should come to the girl, or at least I think so. They have only subjected her for years to a rather severe process of coercion, in which, if I judge rightly, they will be worsted. Unless, as you suggest, Miss Vassie dies, and saves further argument."

"Good God!" said the doctor scornfully, though he professed to believe that his words were empty; "and then they will declare that the Almighty removed her to a better world; and talk about her being safe from sin, and all that kind of twaddle. Better smother the children in infancy; 'twould be less painful for them, and for us doctors too; and far less costly."

"They don't see it so. They are anything rather than logical. And I think before it comes to that



extremity they will give in. Anyway, before I condemn them I will try."

"You will fail; fail, that is, if they are of the sort that talk pious. Perhaps there is a parson amongst them; and the sacerdotal animus has always been against women. These children are our modern reformers. It is the *auto-da-fé* in modern guise. Only burning is too untidy a process to suit our modern inquisition. We put them out of the way with less flare and crackle."

"I hope not; I trust not with all my heart. Will you say you're wrong if you're proved so?"

"Save the child anyway. She is too good to lose. Though it is a weary world, and perhaps to finish would be best for her. Take her some food. I suppose you can't get her out of that house?"

"I think I had better not bring her here till her people have done all they will. They might use my action as a pretext for doing nothing. If all else fails, I can see. But I am not of their society, and it might complicate matters, and set them against the girl."

"That too?" said the doctor. "Pious, poor, aristocratic, opinionated! You have a hopeless combination."

But Miss Sawday has the habit of success. She followed the doctor out, and walked straight to Tabitha.

"The doctor says this place isn't fit for you, and you ought to move. And you are to be fed up. I have brought some beef-tea and things for the present till you can get more from home."

"Oh! I can't write home," said Tabitha, flushing, and feeling as if the idea cut through her aching head like a knife. "Not till I'm better."

"But you must. It would not be right to leave your

people ignorant. I would write, only it might be unacceptable; and I will if you don't feel able. I can't take the responsibility of you alone. You have got a feverish attack, and the doctor thinks you won't be fit for much for some time to come. Your mother ought to know."

"I don't want her to know," said Tabitha, wearily. "I shall get well, and then I'll tell her when it's over."

"No, to-night. If you don't tell they might justly blame me. It may be a means of making friends. They will see that you did not write till you were really at extremities. Tell them the doctor's orders. They know what you earn. Some one will come up to look after you, or they will pay for necessaries. It isn't as if they were very poor; they'll never know the difference."

"You shouldn't have sent the doctor. I can never pay him," said Tabitha.

"He will never ask you to. Your father will probably prefer to pay. He will not choose to be under an obligation. But that's not your affair."

"I can't talk," said Tabitha, making a feeble effort to rise, and then falling back on her pillows. "I'm too miserable, and too hot. And it hurts my throat."

"I won't press the point," said Miss Sawday, relinquishing the argument. "And I've just an hour to spare. Let me make you more comfortable before I go. And then I'll drop in and see Miss Adnitt."

When Miss Sawday was gone, Tabitha, refreshed, got her writing materials and wrote to her mother. She did not care to be bidden to write, and yet she was glad to know that dispassionate observers thought she ought to do so. Perhaps it was never right to keep secrets. She had never asked for anything since she had had these rooms of her own, and she asked now

only in obedience to outside pressure. She knew her mother was fond of her, though she found so much fault. And illness was, according to the Vassie faith, caused by special and direct interposition of the Almighty; perhaps it might now be sent as a reconciler?

So she wrote in a wandering and uncertain hand, and said that she was ill in bed; and that the doctor had seen her, and ordered physic and beef-tea and wine, and to move into other rooms when she got better. But she did not mind these rooms, though they were small. She knew that things cost money, and these were the best she could afford. She would be earning more presently, but now, laid by, her writing came to a standstill, and there was nothing beyond her salary, which would go on for a little while all the same. Miss Sawday had been to see her, and had been very kind. She hoped she was a little better to-day, and that mamma would not worry. She dare say she should do just as well without a lot of things to eat. Then it was past post time, and Tabitha was too tired to care.

But a letter was posted to Benscote by Miss Sawday with her own hands. She said that Miss Vassie was ill; too ill to write; that the doctor thought seriously of her, and had insisted on her friends being communicated with, especially because he considered the room where she now lay too small and sunless; and because he had ordered nourishment which Miss Vassie had not been in the habit of allowing herself. The doctor said that she had been underfed and overworked; and living in a sunless house, the wonder was she had not broken down before. The eager enthusiasm of these girls, said Miss Sawday, often led them into such follies, as Mrs. Vassie would be ready to agree. Miss Sawday had ascertained that there was an

unoccupied room on the same floor, belonging to a lady who was away, and would be pleased to let. And thrice she wrote the letter before she could get to her satisfaction its opening and closing phrases, of apology, of expressions of love for Benscote and Ransham, of urgent pleas for her cause, of assurances of the good opinions held about Miss Vassie by those well qualified to judge.

And next morning when the first train was due, she sent round to the block to hear whether the Vassies had wired or had arrived.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### IRRECONCILABLES

"DEAR MISS SAWDAY,

"Mr. Vassie and myself are much obliged for your note and for your kind solicitude as to our daughter. I need not say that I was at first a good deal alarmed, but I am glad to assure you that I have had by the second post my daughter's own account of her slight indisposition, and that she is already better. The doctor seems to have needlessly alarmed you. You will be glad to hear that I met your mother yesterday evening, and thought her looking remarkably well. The foliage is unusually early this year, and the country is looking extremely pretty. And we are all taking great pleasure in my little grandson, who is now getting quite a big boy."

"There!" said Mrs. Vassie. "I hope I have written quite civilly; but I meant at the same time to show her that between Tabitha and her home there is no need of a go-between. Evidently, Tabitha was quite able to write for herself, and I think it rather officious. She means well possibly, but you could not expect a person in her position to have the feeling of a gentlewoman."

"If all Tabby has got by going to London is Miss Sawday's friendship, it was not much worth going for," observed Bella.

"Poor old Tabby! She was too grand and learned for the people we know here; they are at least better



placed than the Sawdays," said Mary. "She didn't ask them to meet me."

"I believe Tabby's ill and won't say so," said Hilda, decidedly. "Some one ought to go to her. Imagine if she died, and you had taken no notice! Then you'd reproach yourself."

"We are all in the hands of the Almighty," said Mrs. Vassie. "Any one of us might die at any time. But I, of course, take my own daughter's account before that of a stranger, and a stranger I may well consider Miss Sawday to be, although her relatives reside in the neighbourhood. Tabitha distinctly says she is better, and that she hopes her father and I will not be anxious. 'I think I am a little better to-day, and you are not to worry;' those are her words. In the face of that, what is there to be done? And it would be difficult to know who could go. I never was in London alone in my life, and Mary is out of the question. And the expense would be considerable. It is most merciful, and I'm most thankful that nobody is required to go, as of course one must if Tabitha were ill; really ill, I mean."

"Shall I go?" said Hilda. "I should do, and I could pay for myself, and then I could let you know. I'm going anyhow soon, the moment I'm twenty-one."

"So long as you live in my house, Hilda, you must conform to my ideas of what's right and fitting. I dare say you think me wrong and old-fashioned; that is the way with girls now-a-days; but in my opinion a girl of your age could not go; it would not be at all the thing. I have said that it is unnecessary for anybody; Tabitha does not ask for it. And we know nothing of Miss Sawday. She may be a very nervous person in illness; some are. And those sort of persons are apt to make the most of any affair; it magnifies their importance."

Mrs. Vassie paused in the fastening of her envelope, and sat regarding it. It was her own mind that needed first fastening to the point.

"I am very sorry that Tabitha should be ill," she said. "I gather from her letter that she is not in a happy frame of mind. But I hope it may make her feel that she did not act wisely or rightly in going away from a happy home. This illness may be the means of bringing her to a happier frame of mind. Though I am sorry to see that Tabitha does not now confess herself in the wrong; she evidently hopes that her father and I will change our minds and enable her to persist in her own way. And of course we should have been glad enough to let her indulge her fancy if it ever had been at all right that she should do so. There is no mention of coming home to be a good and obedient daughter; no suggestion of placing herself in her father's hands and mine that we may judge for her and act as we think well. Tabitha was always wedded to her own ways; what she thought right has always been of the first importance to her. I can't think where she got this temper from; for I have always brought you up, as far as I could, to do as you were bid by your father, which, of course, for children is the one duty. I have never bidden Tabitha to do anything except what was right and proper. And I've no doubt that Tabitha finds it very uncomfortable alone, ill. It shows how wrong it is to set up her own judgment against those who know better. And I'm afraid from the tone of this letter that Miss Sawday encourages her in resistance."

"It isn't fair," cried Hilda, "to argue that Tabby's alone and ill because she has done wrong. Has nobody ever been ill; has nobody ever been lonely just because

they were too good for their own people and place instead of too bad for them?"

"You do exaggerate so, Hilda," said Mrs. Vassie, sternly. "It is a bad habit. I have not said that Tabitha was too bad to live; it is ridiculous; and I shouldn't have expected that even you would say that Tabitha, just because she is headstrong and goes her own way, is too good to associate with her own family. You young people are too fond of comparing yourselves to persons far above you, instead of doing your duty in a plain, quiet way."

"That wasn't what I meant at all," said Hilda. "You don't understand. I mean that people in the world quite as often suffer for doing right as for doing wrong; and that poor Tabby's being ill and lonely proves nothing."

"In your opinion, Hilda, I dare say I am a very foolish person, and understand nothing. But it would be more becoming to refrain from saying so."

"Well, anyhow we are all very glad that Tabby's better, and doesn't want real nursing. Of course if she'd been really ill, mamma would have gone to her. It's a mercy, on all accounts, she isn't." Mary spoke cheerfully in the interests of peace."

"Isn't she ill? That's just it," persisted Hilda.

But no one answered. And the energy and determination engendered by this small strife impelled Mrs. Vassie to close her letter and to take it down to the post-bag.

A note from Hilda went in also.

"I can't get out to-night to the post-office," she wrote. "But this is to say that you are to take care of yourself and that next time you write you are to make the worst of yourself, and not the best. Aunt

and Mary (you know what Mary is, with her tiresome 'cheerful views' of everything) would refuse to believe you were ill unless you said you were dying. To-morrow I shall send you some money. If you send it back I'll tell. Think of that, and refrain. It is to buy beef-tea and the rest of it. And you are to get well soon and to see about making a place for me when I come up. I'm counting the weeks. Don't think I'm unselfish. I save up for the good time that's coming. What do I care for clothes to wear down here, for the Ides to look at on Sundays? But if you go and starve yourself before I come, think how miserable I shall be! With my hundred a year and your salary we shall be ever so rich."

Mrs. Vassie did not read aloud her reply to Tabitha's letter. But it was preserved by Tabitha, and so fell into my hands. Here it is,—

"MY DEAR TABITHA,

"I am sorry to hear that you have been ill. You say you are better, and I hope by this time you are quite well again. I do not blame you for allowing Miss Sawday to write, for I'm sure you did not wish her to do so. I answered her letter, of course. Your papa and I think it shows a desire to meddle; but of course one cannot expect the best taste from her. Your father is coming up to London to a meeting the end of the week. He has not been well lately, and a cold troubles him a good deal that he cannot shake off. Jack writes very happily about his prospects now that he has left Oxford for good; but poor Tom has had the ill luck to lose a horse, and your father has very kindly been sending him a draft to buy a new one. Tom says that it is impossible to be without a horse in those



parts. Of course it is a great expense. But I hope that in another year or sooner we may be able to do without a governess. Miss Tempest has brought on your sisters very well, and given them an education quite as good as your father and I approve for girls; and Hilda, Miss Tempest thinks, has unusually good abilities, so she would even be able to train the little boys till they have to go to school. Who is the doctor who has been attending you? In one of this month's magazines there is an article written by a man of the same name, to which papa called my attention, of which all right-minded persons must strongly disapprove. In your position you must be careful whom you employ. Who recommended him?"

This letter, as it lies among a number of others, is distinguished from the rest by being spotted with tears. Were they Tabitha's? She had hoped much while she lay suffering, and now she could not hope any more. She did not even hope to get well, except that she did not like the notion of all her properties falling into Mr. Vassie's hands. He had always despised girls' things, and there were some books and a few trinkets that she would not like to have tossed about carelessly. And when she had gone without food to buy furniture it did seem as if it should be given to a legatee of her own selection. She got up, thinking she would write a will, or at least a letter, which, after her death, they could not neglect. But she felt too ill, and she could not think unless she was lying down. The future must take its chance. She pushed her mother's letter into a drawer, and lay down again, with Hilda's letter clasped tight in her hand, crying, but no step nearer to giving up what she believed to be right and just.



Or were the tears Mrs. Vassie's? It is quite possible. For that she shed a good many tears during that twenty-four hours, I have every reason to believe. If without delay she could have followed her own impulses, she would have gone to her child by the next train, and perhaps they would have made up their differences and would now be happily living together. But before you condemn her, remember that she was more powerless to direct her own life than was Tabitha herself. As the world is at present constituted, money means power to control action. Without money, what can you do? Where can you go? What can you give? And Mrs. Vassie, in the midst of material comfort, had not a sixpence that she could call her very own. If she wanted a sovereign, she must first ask her husband to give it to her. If he saw fit to do so—and often he found many plausible reasons for doing nothing of the kind—he might accompany his gift with so many unwelcome and ungracious words, that nothing but her controlling sense of duty prevented her from flinging the coin on the table and leaving the room. But she and her daughter were alike in this: what they thought it right to do, that they did, and paid the price. She believed it to be her bounden duty to submit herself to her husband; for every woman to obey every husband; in theory, for a wise woman to obey a husband who was a fool or an imbecile. In practice I have thought that Mrs. Vassie, like a good many women of her type, obeyed negatively; she would not have done wrong at his bidding, but at his bidding she would abstain from doing right.

Mrs. Vassie, therefore, could not go to the station and take a ticket to London; tickets must be paid for. She could not stay in London, because of the price of the room; nor pretend to nurse Tabitha,

unless she meant to buy the physic and nourishment that the doctor ordered. Furthermore, Mrs. Vassie would have been ill herself in a week if, with a troubled mind, she had lived as and where Tabitha lived. And if Tabitha's mother was on the spot, the wife of a man proud of his position, was it to be expected for a moment that the doctor would send in no bill?

And Mr. Vassie? Since he was a young man, now long ago, he had not laid himself open to new ideas; and women of Tabitha's pattern were, long ago, not very commonly made. He had to deal with an abnormal, vagarious creature, whose habits he was not only now unfamiliar with, but felt himself unable to bring under the reckoning of any known law. Mrs. Vassie could have taught him something, had she been disposed to teach and he to learn; but only a few days had gone by since the half-yearly settlement of the household accounts, and it is not surprising that Mrs. Vassie, fearing a repetition of that unpleasant process, gave herself the benefit of the doubt as to the serious nature of Tabitha's illness. Nagging is supposed to be a woman's verb; yet if it means to repeat over and over again the same disagreeable remarks about affairs that must remain in an unchanged condition, then I can find no other word so aptly describing Mr. Vassie's action with regard to household finance. For my part, I consider that it is no appurtenance of sex; but rather that it is an inevitable consequence of unused energy in man or woman.

Whether or no, he and she held firmly to the smallest applications of what I have before alluded to as the remains of feudalism, the law of status. He believed that a man in his position had a right to live after a particular fashion. He had a duty to keep up the house of

his forbears; and a right to send his sons to Oxford, to London, or to expensive public schools; he ought to have servants, spare cash in his pocket, and his girls idle at home. All these luxuries cost money; between them they should have cost more money than he had. His scheme of existence, consequently, would not work out simply to a simple result. He could not reach to any one of his ambitions except by accomplishing all in a stinting fashion. Not one was fulfilled in ample comfort. Not one reached quite high-water mark. But still everything was done somehow. And in one way or another he carried out the scheme of things that he had made, by the guidance of his philosophical principles, early in his life. The one thing that he had had more than he had then counted upon, was children. He frequently reminded himself, his wife, and them of this error in the preliminary statement. It seemed to him, and also to his wife, that the children should merge all their criticisms as to the manner of existence, in general thankfulness for the boon of existence of any sort.

As for this particular matter, he had already sent the price of a horse to South America for Tom; he had also paid a bill for Jack at Oxford, and another to enable Jack to set up in his new curacy according to those laws of life by which Mr. Vassie was governed. Jack pointed out that a gentleman's son is expected to have certain things, and that they all cost money. He had added, "Of course, governor, if you say you can't send me the money, I shall make myself content. But I think my refusing to pay in the usual course might be misinterpreted, all the more as it is sure to leak out that one of the girls is out in the world earning. It might be thought that we had had serious losses, and that, of course, neither you nor I should desire."

Jack told the truth, and had the money, and Mr. Vassie's banking account stood low. No one would talk about, for no one would know, the manner of Tabitha's daily existence in London; but the fact of her being there might easily get on the wind. And if Jack were at the same time seen to be needy, what might not be said? Would not deductions be drawn? Would not gossips tell true? How else do we judge the depth of our neighbour's pocket?

Jack had his right of status too; he was the eldest son of a man of private means. And had not Tabitha hers? Ought she not, in obedience to it, to have stayed at home, humbly taking the share that was allotted to her? Who asked her to starve herself? Every one knows that starving is an extremely unwholesome habit. It came of Tabitha's far-fetched notions, setting herself up for better than the rest. Clearly, Tabitha was the one in fault.

The notion of any equality between men and women does not go far even in the modern mind; and before the modern mind was developed such a notion was held to stand at the height of impiety and folly. Mrs. Vassie did say to her husband that night: "I am afraid that Tabitha does not always give herself enough to eat. And however wrong she has been, I don't like to think of a daughter of mine starving."

But Mr. Vassie replied: "Don't let us talk about starving, my dear. I object to strong language. I thought you had written to her to-day." If a question once settled was afterwards to be raised, where was peace?

Poor Mrs. Vassie! For my part, though I am sorry for Tabitha, I would much rather suffer her troubles than her mother's. There was a chicken for dinner that night, and Mrs. Vassie could think of nothing but

Tabitha, and how much she would like to send Tabitha her slice. She could scarcely swallow a morsel, though Mr. Vassie said it was very tender, and complimented Bella and Mary on their skill as henwives. But Mrs. Vassie has often punished her children for their good, when it hurt her sentiment more than it hurt theirs. Not a shadow of doubt hung over her faith that Tabitha ought to give in, ought to come home submissive. And if one course of action be undeniably right and virtuous, if in one direction lies the higher life, what is a trifle of suffering more or less in the attainment of it? Mothers must suffer for the children's sake; and if sometimes they suffer in the wrong place I have no doubt that good comes out of it, somehow, somewhere. Tabitha was her mother's daughter; and both mother and daughter wept that night, suffering for conscience's sake, yet nowise inclined to give in.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### FRIENDS IN NEED

Miss Sawday, after the close of this correspondence, carried Tabitha off to her house out Hammersmith way and cured her. It was not a convenient moment, because Mrs. Sawday had come to pay her daughter a long-promised visit, and one is tied to the house with an invalid. On the other hand, Mrs. Sawday is an excellent nurse, and prolonged conversation with her involving no great mental strain, she is a most worthy companion for a patient whose brain is ordered complete rest. But it made Tabitha's heart sore to see the relations between this mother and daughter. She had always tried to believe that intellectual gaps can never be bridged over between near relations; and so, having relegated her want of home sympathy to the domain of evils necessary, she found it less hard to bear. Yet there seemed no breach between this pair; each admired heartily in the other the good qualities she did not possess. And the affection of both was centred on Mr. Abraham.

Mrs. Sawday has great faith in the advantages of learning; but her firmest faith is placed in the advantages of eating. She plied her daughter and Miss Vassie diligently. "You ought to eat plenty, both of you, working your brains as you do," she said. And she took Tabitha's paper and books away from her till she had swallowed the measured supply of beef-tea between meals.

As for *The Woman Patriot*, its columns showed no falling off in either style or merit; and when Tabitha got better, Madame sent to her a cheque for copy furnished very much larger than Tabitha, in her anxiety had reckoned as due. Miss Sawday said that Tabitha did not need to be bothering her head reading her own articles in the *Patriot* just then; she must have overlooked something; and what could it matter; and that the one thing to do with an editor's cheque is to change it without loss of time. With that Miss Sawday took the current number of the *Patriot* away and hid it. So that Tabitha, as I suppose, never found out that her titles of discarded articles appeared over letter-press in Miss Sawday's terse and Madame Renner's more ornate style. Reckoned in with Tabitha's they would have summed up to just the right amount. But Tabitha was too ill and worn to see the matter clearly. She was glad to find her funds less low and Madame Renner less inconvenienced by the illness than might have been feared. As for Miss Sawday, it is well known that she is one of women who pay a heavy toll on their happiness and success; while Madame Renner astonishes nobody when she leaves a job that would pay, to do another that is never likely to find a reward in money.

Do not let it be supposed that Mrs. Vassie did nothing, or that she did not take to heart the fact that her daughter was fed and tended by strangers—I fear Mrs. Vassie would have said by inferiors. She thought about it continually. Even poor little Ada and her recurring troubles were pushed into a back place in her mind. She dwelt much on the doctor's dictum that Tabitha had been underfed. "Is it possible," she said to herself, "that girls of good position can be really that? It is very sad, very sad indeed, if so. Not actually to

have enough to eat! One would hardly think it could be possible. Tabitha was always one who felt strongly, and might, unwittingly, exaggerate. Dainties, of course, she could hardly expect. And as for the doctor's opinion, well! he could only know what his patient told him."

It never crossed Mrs. Vassie's mind that such under-feeding is so common that the dullest of us know where to look out for symptoms. And had she not Mary's cheerful account of her visit to Tabitha? Had not even Geoffrey, who was rather fastidious, said that Tabitha gave him and his friend a nice little dinner? Even granted that it were true that Tabitha was underfed, what should she do? That would clearly be a case for money, and Mrs. Vassie had none. She did the next best thing, so that she might, as she said, be safe on both sides; she packed a hamper with a piece of country-fed pork, some vegetables, and a large and rich plum-cake. An underfed person might find some eating before the end of it. And when Mr. Vassie started for London she gave it to the man who drove his master to the station, and told him to see it put in the train, and not to worry his master more than he could help. It was very good of Mr. Vassie to take so much trouble, so Mrs. Vassie said to the girls. And the hamper followed Tabitha to Miss Sawday's, arriving on one of her worst days.

"They don't understand," said Tabitha, apologetically, as she feebly unpacked it. "They never did. I told you so." Stooping, or something, made the tears come into her eyes. And then Mrs. Sawday carried the whole thing bodily away. Her tears were of indignation.

"They don't know any better, mother," said Miss Sawday. "Don't be angry with them! It's too pitiful.

We'll have the pork when Abraham comes on Saturday. Tell the child it's the thing you're fondest of."

"I'd like to tell that mother of hers," said Mrs. Sawday. "She don't deserve to have children if she don't know better how to use 'em."

"I wouldn't change mothers, though you mightn't think it," said Miss Sawday, kissing the wrinkled face. It was a moment for family confidences.

"Abraham is a good deal here," said Mrs. Sawday, "it seems to me."

"Since Miss Vassie has been backwards and forwards he has had a good deal of business in town."

"She's a nice little thing; not but what I could wish, if I was her mother, that she was more hearty," said Mrs. Sawday. "'Twould make a piece of work at home, so much they think of themselves. I should like to see old Vassie's face! Not but what Abraham might do a deal better for himself, to my thinking."

"I don't wish to see his face, but I shan't be afraid to see it if it shows itself," said Miss Sawday. "It hasn't come to that, and I don't suppose it ever will. I should dearly like Abraham to marry a well-educated woman. But he's like the rest of the boys; they always pick a girl different to their sisters; that's why it's sometimes good for a boy to have sisters who aren't up to much. Contrast in that case is pleasing."

"He couldn't do better than pick to match his sisters," said Mrs. Sawday, fondly. "I couldn't ask a better, and I might very easy get a worse."

"They won't come to you for my character, mother."

"And I hope they won't go to her mamma for poor little Miss Vassie's. She's downright cruel to the child, to my thinking."

"Not a bit of it to her own thinking," explained Miss Sawday. "They are really attached to each other."

If the child makes a success (she may yet, Madame thinks well of her), they'll have her home glorifying, and fancy they did a good half of it. Women like Mrs. Vassie have no imagination. She doesn't know, and you can't make her see the true state of things. I wrote a letter as strong as I dared; the pork and plum-cake is my answer. If none of us had been on the spot the child might have died; more likely would have become a helpless invalid, and gone to wear out her life at home, amid reproaches. Then they'd have pointed and said: 'I told you so. Women are not fit for work. Home's the only place for such poor weak creatures.' "

"If they want to keep the girls at home, they should get them married off comfortably," said Mrs. Sawday, unconsciously perpetrating a bull. "There's plenty of young men about 'd be all the better for a wife with a bit of money."

"That they'd think indelicate."

"Rubbish, my dear! You don't make me believe that a grown woman can be so silly. We all know the girls 'd like to be married; you don't want 'em to tell you so in so many words. And the best thing that can happen to 'em, if they get a good husband with the means to keep 'em. And it's best for all to get comfortably settled in homes of their own before their fathers and mothers get into years."

"Where are the men? Girls don't marry. And then they want something to do."

"They'd have enough to do if they was married to men with land of their own. I know what belongs to work. As for the boys, they don't know what's good for 'em, no more than the girls. Perhaps there isn't men enough to go round. There's short commons of many sorts. But if one's got to sit outside, it may as



well be somebody else's girl as mine; better too, for me. Sit with your mouth open and your hands before you, and you may bite short all your life. Marrying's the same as other things. You bring good wares to market, my dear; and you needn't fear you'll be blamed if you do push 'em off a bit."

"That's it. They haven't that firm confidence in the excellence of their own wares that you have, mother dear."

"Haven't they? Then they ought to have. Who's to believe in you, if not your mother that brought you up? If I'd set my mind on having girls of another sort, I'd have 'em you may be sure. But I don't want to change with the best in the land, neither sons nor daughters. I shouldn't better myself. And she may think herself a fortunate girl that gets one of mine, let it be your brother Abraham or another."

"In fine society, mother," said Miss Sawday, laughing, "they may think the same as you do, but they don't speak out the same. They wrap things up."

"And many times when you've undone the wrappers there's nothing inside. Those that think clear, and know their own minds, speak out, and let other people know it too. I've no patience with shilly-shallying. And your thinking follows your speaking oftener than you'd think. Get yourself into the way of slip-sloppy talk: you ain't sure if you mean that, and perhaps it wouldn't be proper to say the other; and presently you won't know your own mind from another woman's when you meet in the street."

"I never do meet your mind in the street, mother. I wish I did. The street produces nothing so desirable. And especially your mind about women. Most people don't know what they do think about women, and the few who do know won't say. I don't know what to

think myself about Miss Vassie; the doctor thinks seriously of her still. He says she'll break down hopelessly if she goes back to her old ways. Yet I can't wish her to go home, a failure. And more money can only mean more work, of which she has too much already."

"She eats no more than a sparrow. She ought to be able to earn enough to keep her, I'm sure."

"So she can. It's earning and learning at the same time that breaks them in pieces."

"You did it."

"I was encouraged. You don't know what a difference that makes. And then I knew if the worst came to the worst you'd back me up. I wasn't striving under the pressure of a deadly fear."

"I don't say I liked it at first," said Mrs. Sawday. "I'd seen too much of the school-mistresses in the village to wish one of mine to spend her life like that. Children's very wearing even if they're your own, and then the Almighty sends 'em and you've got to do your best. And they grow up; that makes a lot of difference. School-children don't never; as fast as you've done with one lot there's another comes. Still, you'd set your heart upon it, and it had to be. And do what you may, it makes all the difference whether you do your best at it or your worst. I've heard your father say, 'When you ain't sure that a fence can be jumped at all, jump high. Go half-hearted at it, and for sure you'll be landed in the thorns.'"

Mr. Abraham ate some slices of the pork the next day but one; and Mrs. Sawday praised it so heartily that Tabitha was comforted, and considered her mother's present not, after all, so ill-chosen. And the cake went round on some Thursday afternoon tea-parties for Miss Sawday's company.

The days slipped into weeks, and the time came round for Tabitha to go home to Benscote for a short holiday. It would, so the doctor said, complete the cure to have a spell of country air and good food. And Madame Renner enlisted the help of her brother to enable her to keep *The Woman Patriot* in her own hands, and Miss Vassie's place open.

Miss Sawday and Miss Vassie travelled down together. And the same train carried an acceptance from Mr. Willan of Mr. Fewell's kind invitation for a week-end.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### AN ALIEN IN THE LAND

Benscote was as it has been since the summer when Tabitha was born. The same patch of lichen discoloured the red roof above the girls' window, and though the shrubs may be bigger, they had not grown as far as Tabitha's eyes. The same plants were in each bed before Mr. Vassie's study, where he still shut himself up from breakfast to mid-day; the girls, who have lost their taste for noisy play, might now walk quietly past. The daily governess came no more, because it was holiday-time; and Mrs. Vassie had a fine project for Hilda's finishing the younger girls, and beginning to prepare the little boys for the business of life. Hilda was always studying, and ready to teach a bit between whiles. And when Mrs. Vassie's own boys were done with, she might begin on Ada's, who could send them over in the pony-cart every morning. To have children about keeps a house lively. And though Ernest Fewell strongly objects to strong minded, learned women, he might the more readily pardon Hilda if these faults of hers were made to minister to his own boys' success. The most violent opponent of women's learning will agree that tiny boys are best taught by a woman, who may not be a fool; it is manifestly fitting that some women should do that which is disadvantageous to themselves for the sake of giving the boys and men a lift. So Mrs. Vassie had planned it all betimes. She was away now staying with

Ada; and Ada's boy was at Benscote under charge of his aunts, where he upset the routine at some points, though Mary did her best to keep things in their old groove, her loyalty demanding unchanged adherence to the smallest rules, and even to customary phrases. The girls sat in the school-room and did their needle-work of a morning while the boy was asleep. Tabitha had brought books with her. Some of them had been lent to her by Madame Renner, with certain hopes of proselytizing. She had one on her knee and another lay on the table.

"It's so unsociable to read when you've only just come home, Tabby. Talk to us and tell us the news. We can read when we're alone."

"What news?" said Tabitha, putting a letter into the leaves. "I've none to tell that would sound amusing."

"That's impossible in London. Anything! Tell us about the places you go to, and the people you see. Do you still like being at that club?"

"And you can tell us about the fashions," said Bella. "We never see anything or anybody about here. And London things have always a sort of style. I liked that hat you had on the day you came, travelling."

"I don't know about fashions," said Tabitha. "We've enough to do to get our work done, and something to wear. If it's pretty, is not that enough? I like being at the club. You see a lot of new people. The Committee's often difficult; committees are. I've been staying with Miss Sawday for the last three weeks, you know. I was not well enough to go out most of the time."

"You weren't really bad, though, were you?" said Mary. "Not ill, I mean, with a real illness? You never wrote to say exactly what the doctor called it. I dare say Miss Sawday liked to have you. It must have



made her feel quite uplifted. Mr. Abraham met Miss Ide one day, and told her you were there. Mamma was saying she thought she'd perhaps pay a proper call on Mrs. Sawday, as she'd been kind to you. But there's no hurry."

"I shall go and see Mrs. Sawday anyhow," said Tabitha hotly. "They've been kinder to me than I can tell. I think I shouldn't be here to tell the tale if it weren't for her. She's a real friend."

"I shouldn't have thought you'd have cared to make a real friend of anybody like that, that we don't visit," said Bella. "You seem to have to know a lot of very queer persons in London; I suppose it's the club? Geoffrey told me one Thursday, when he went into your rooms, there was a very common little person sitting there as if the place belonged to her. She told Geoffrey she was a friend of yours, and her name was Miss Attingshall, or something like that."

"It was very pleasant for the Sawdays having you, Tabby," said Mary.

"Papa sent the Sawdays some grapes the other day; it was a pity they were all away, but of course we weren't supposed to know that. They had their *quid pro quo*, though; papa said so. Of course they don't visit about here at all. It would be something for them to say in Ransham that they'd had one of us staying with them."

"If Geoffrey comes to my house he must put up with my friends," said Tabitha. "I think it's vulgar to consider such things. I value people for what they are, not for what their grandfathers were."

"People are excellent," said Bella. "I dare say the washerwoman is excellent. But I don't want to have her to tea."

"That's absurd," cried Tabitha. "Miss Sawday is

better educated than any one about here. And she is thought a great deal of in London."

"What does it matter?" said Mary, cheerfully. "I dare say she's very nice, and I'm sure she's very kind. And you might call with mamma when she comes home, if you liked. I'm going to see if the boy's awake."

"Don't draw us into an intimacy with the Sawdays, that's all," said Bella. "Ernest and Ada would be horrified. And I really could not put up with it myself."

"What's Ernest to me?" said Tabitha. "I scarcely know him."

"He's a man," retorted Bella. "And a man must know better about such things than you do."

"Query?" rejoined Tabitha.

"What's the good of disagreeing about things?" asked Mary. "Ernest knows some things, of course; Tabby perhaps others. Let it be! You might read some of your book, if it's so interesting."

Tabitha opened where the letter lay and read a few sentences.

"I don't know a bit what they mean," said Bella. "I think a story's better for reading out loud. We've just finished one. Shall we begin another?"

"It's a mistake to read out loud a book that you don't all agree with beforehand," said Mary. "It isn't fair for the ones who don't happen to like it. Something that goes straight on, as things do, is much better. If once we begin to discuss things, we might be always disagreeing, and we don't get to the end of the book."

"There are worse things than that," said Tabitha. "Better disagree than never have an opinion. And every woman ought to be interested in that which concerns women. How are we to progress else?"

"Things that concern women! I'm sure I don't know why 'ought' if it doesn't strike your fancy. And what sort of women? Housekeeping, and your clothes, and somebody else's babies? That's what I do all day; I'm tired of it; and when I read a book I want to read about something else. It isn't all women that write books or edit newspapers, Tabby, though it would be nice enough if you sold the books for a lot of money, and could do what you liked with it."

"Housekeeping, and clothes, and babies; you've forgotten the husband, Bella—a necessary evil. So that's all of life?"

"Yes, I forgot the husband," said Bella, not detecting Tabitha's irony, and thinking kindly that Tabitha was feeling ill, and was cross in consequence. "The husband, of course, if he comes; he doesn't always. And one doesn't talk about that; one can't do anything, as one may with clothes, or the dinner."

"Oh, leave off that, and look at the boy," said Mary, coming back. "Such a darling! He doesn't bother his dear ickle head with things out of books, did he, there's a pet."

"You speak as if ideas in books were invented just to be in the books," said Tabitha, irritably refusing to give up the argument. "So they are sometimes, but then they don't live. Some one must have lived out the theories. They are laid by in a book just to keep them safe, till you want them to use; just as you might lay your clothes in a cupboard till you want to wear them. But ideas and clothes are no good except to wear."

"I always want to wear my clothes," said Bella, "when they are at all nice; I have so few. It might be different if I'd a great many. Things in books have nothing to do with my life. I don't know about yours,

Tabby; you have to write for a paper, you see. You must have something to say if you write, and you may as well say one thing as another if only it's amusing to read. I used to be fonder of reading than I am; I don't care to much, now, unless it's exciting, really exciting. What's the good? It doesn't alter things."

"There are lots of things want altering," cried Tabitha with a quivering voice. "If every one sat and did nothing, where would the world be by this time? Lots of the new ideas are foolish; some are worse. And yet among the new ideas we must look for the faiths that are to move the world. In faith, in politics, in religion, in manners and customs, everything has to grow and be made new if it is to last. We can't go in the old ways even if we would."

There was a surprised pause. Then Mary spoke.

"Not in faith and religion, Tabby? You don't mean that. The old faith means all that is true and right. We can't alter that, I am thankful to say."

"You speak as if growth and change were the work of the devil."

"So it is when you want to apply it to religion, and to things you've got to believe. I'm sure mamma would say so if she were here."

"Mamma's saying it wouldn't make it any more true if it weren't true before. Everything that isn't dead grows; and what grows alters. And when you go out in the world you see many things that you hadn't thought of when you stopped at home. What's true for you, even for mamma, needn't be true for me. I see with my own eyes."

"It's nonsense to say the truth is not always true. And I'm sure papa would say so too," said Mary, bravely standing to her guns, though they were of obsolete pattern and had to oppose Tabitha's new

quick-firing artillery. "And you can't say, Tabitha, that you've found as much time to read and study as papa has done. You may think women don't know; but there are men who would say I was right, and clever men too, I'm thankful to say."

"What's the good of quarreling," said Bella in her turn. "You'll never agree if you talk all night. And Tabby likes to argue for arguing's sake. You'll have the boy crying if you keep on, and that I can't abide. Look at him!"

So there was silence.

That night Mrs. Vassie came home weary and perplexed over the birth of Ada's baby and Ada's delicate health. She was herself wondering whether God's providence was over all His world, since such things are. She was nearer to a sceptical mind than ever she had been before in her life.

"I pray to be delivered from the sin of unbelief," said Mrs. Vassie to Mary, who was thirty, and therefore old enough to hear about such things. "But if anything could make me doubt the existence of a God it would be the way in which children come into this world. Poor little Ada is so young! And the boy is not a year old. Ernest is a good husband and very devout in his mind. He does not complain, though it is a great anxiety for a man. It would have seemed so much better if the Almighty had seen fit to put this off a little longer. Not but what I'm fond of children, as you know, but this is really so very perplexing. It might so much better, so it seems, have been managed in another way. It is all I can do to trust that it is all for the best."

"It must be for the best, since that's how things are," said Mary, with conviction. "To know that is a comfort, when there are so many temptations to want of



faith in the world. I feel I ought to tell you, Tabitha has been distressing me by things she's been saying these weeks while you've been away. She says she isn't satisfied with the old faith, and wants something new. I don't know what she means. When first she came down she said she was too tired to walk to church; but she went last Sunday morning, and behaved quite like other people; you wouldn't have known. And I found this book of hers lying about; I thought I had better show it to you."

Mrs. Vassie took up the volume, written by a man so well known that even she had no hesitation in labelling him.

"If Tabitha in London reads the work of unbelievers, I cannot help it, and I am not answerable; but she shall not read them here," said Mrs. Vassie firmly. "So difficult is it to keep one's faith unsmirched, I cannot think how any child of mine should put herself in the way of temptation. There are so many perplexing facts in the world, like this trouble of poor little Ada's, that one must meet and can't get over; there is no need to invent sceptical ideas in books."

"I didn't read it, mamma," said Mary. "I don't think I should understand it if I did read it through. But I dipped into it here and there, and I saw quite enough to make sure that it was not very desirable reading."

"I hope you don't understand, I'm sure. I hope Tabitha doesn't."

Perhaps at another time Mrs. Vassie might not have taken the matter so much to heart; but at this moment, when her own faith seemed to be built on insecure foundations, she was fearful lest doubt of God's providence, worst of all evils, from which she had thought herself free, should also suddenly assail one of her girls.

She carried Tabitha's book away, and shut it in her wardrobe, on the same shelf where, years ago, she had been used to hide dangerous or fragile toys. Tabitha would ask for the book, and then would fall the opportunity for giving a verdict on its contents. Not that Mrs. Vassie read it. She opened here and there a page; read here and there a sentence, which she did not understand. She thanked God for that. What hours of fixed endeavour—in Mrs. Vassie's opinion worse than wasted—go to the making of either a sympathetic or a critical study of the work of our ripest living theologian! For good or ill, such critics are not born with their equipment, nor do they find themselves saddled with their peculiar powers and temptations by chance. Nevertheless, Mrs. Vassie did not doubt but that she knew enough to condemn in a block.

Yet, let others do as they may, I am far from blaming Mrs. Vassie. I have known and loved her too many years for that. When our faith in God's providence totters, what can we do better than cling desperately to such faiths as still appear to us unquestionably true? And when we ourselves feel most keenly the misery of evil thinking, we strive, at any hazard, to guard the children we love from suffering the like. What doubts and fears had assailed Mrs. Vassie during the long years when her own children were coming into the world after the appointed order for all men, I have no opportunity of knowing. The occasion, whatever it brought forth, was long past. The struggles, if any, had died down to their root. But they had sprung up again with redoubled force when she was called upon to suffer in her child's person instead of in her own. Perhaps bodily suffering had, in her young days, numbed the energy of the mind. Anyhow, now that Mrs. Vassie's life was more than half over;

now that an unalterable colour had been painted on the years that remained; now that life to her could never mean anything more, or less, than marriage and the birth of children, she found herself driven to question the wisdom and providence of God in this very matter—a matter which, even for those of us who are neither wife nor mother, certainly lies at the foundation of existence, physical and moral. Poisoned at the spring, how shall the water of life flow pure? If God does not judge in the natural process of coming into the world, why should He guard in that other process of leaving it? And if we may not hope to pass through the dark waters holding God's hand, what is there left to live for; and how dare we die?

It is not to be supposed that Mrs. Vassie's doubts were solely to be ascribed to the vicissitudes of her married daughter's life; they only seemed to be because new ideas, good and bad, always are apt to come in with the things we know most about. The monotony of life at Benscote had been broken in many ways, though outward things appeared to Tabitha so little changed. The boys brought home new ideas from college and London; they told what they had read, or what one of the Professors had been heard to say; and though the new ideas were not quite orthodox according to a woman's standard, Mrs. Vassie had been too glad that her boys should "think seriously" on any subject to exercise severe censorship on their reading or talk. Now and again, without, so it seemed, any special or personal agency, in a letter, in a chance conversation, in the air, in a magazine, faint thoughts were born into Mrs. Vassie's mind, that there is change, a change for the better as well as for the worse, in many things, even in those things where she had been accustomed to believe that fixity had at last been reached. She had

been troubled. There had been a movement in her mind like the grumbling of bodily pain; she did not yet suffer, but as she went about other business she could not forget that there might be a serious cause for her sensations.

In another difficulty she would, perhaps, have turned to her husband for advice and counsel. But she held a firm opinion that it is a woman's part to keep the lamp of faith burning in the household. Men might forget to replenish it; they might let it flicker low: they would still be forgiven, that being a household care not falling strictly within their province. But if a wife's faith did not remain steadfast, if she confessed to any dereliction of a primary duty, who can tell what floodgates of misery might not open for the pair of them? Mrs. Vassie remembered how, thirty years ago, on the eve of marriage, he and she had held a long conversation upon religious subjects. If she were now to confide in her husband and tell him all the truth, would it not seem as if she had at last found out that she was in error on that well-remembered day? And that was not at all what she meant. She wanted to be built up in the old style, not to be altered in accordance with the new.

Ever since then, night and morning, Mr. Vassie had read the Bible to his family, and had followed the read chapter by several prayers out of a book laid shyly before him by his bride on the morrow of his marriage, and since then clung to most fondly by her. It had grown into her soul that these humble petitions, couched in precisely that language, lay at the foundation of Christian life and morality. Each clause had hinged itself upon some event of her life. She lived her life over again as the month's prayers went round: here Tabitha had been so ill with croup; there Jack had



a shocking report at school; there Bella had been found out in telling a story. Their monotony comforted her soul; for it seemed to remind her how the things that signify do indeed go on year after year unchanged, in spite of our fears and our complaining; and that it is useless agony to follow the course of variable events that men and newspapers talk about. And knowing the words so well, she could still, as the years went on, weave in the daily, private worries. No item is too small for a case of conscience; and Tom's foreign temptations, Jack's curacy, Mary's goodness, Hilda's studies, and Tabitha's religion occupied a prominent place in her mind during prayer. I do not by any means agree with her thoughts at this time; but I am persuaded that she seldom acted without prayer, and that she followed the path of duty as far as her very short sight enabled her to see it.

But the trouble was now that Ada's life did not look like a thing to think about during prayer, or to discuss with daughters, however dear; and it certainly was not a subject on which to ask the guidance of a husband, however clever. Were all things ordered by an omnipotent God? Were some things outside His province or care? If some things, why not all things? If that which she had once believed so firmly were not true, why is anything else that she had ever believed truer? Perhaps none of it was? Perhaps all things in heaven and earth are uncertain and no man knows anything? If faith shifts its ground, if once you are to begin asking whether this is all true and that is partly false, where are you to stop? You might as well end by denying anything, the fundamental truths of religion, for instance. And then where are you? Mrs. Vassie recognized this as a temptation of the devil commonly reserved for clever persons. And Tabitha



was clever! Heaven send she did not occupy her mind with such sinful debates in the long hours when she sat alone and pored over these books! It might be so. And then the prayers repeated themselves next morning. They, at least were unchanged, and they stood for the Eternal verities. "Preserve us in the faith of the Gospel!" read Mr. Vassie. And his wife saw no other possible meaning to that petition than that her children should hold unwavering the beliefs that were hers, neither adding thereto, nor diminishing therefrom.

Tabitha was better off in that she was able to pour out her troubles to Miss Sawday in the room above the office in the High Street.

"I've nothing in common with them," she said sadly. "The things that they care for don't interest me a bit; and what to me matters supremely is to them foolishness—or worse. Now they've taken an idea that I'm an atheist or something of that kind. As for me, I don't know what an atheist is; they seem to think they know very well. Mamma's locked up my book. I know she has it. I won't ask her for it till the last thing. I don't want to say what I think; and won't say what I don't think. Is it always so, when you try to go on and learn, that you leave the others behind and must be alone?"

"My dear!" said Miss Sawday, "I fear it is the common lot of all mortals who spend their life climbing. The majority don't climb, and you must leave them behind at the bottom of the hill. Yet I think you have not climbed higher than all the rest of the world? There may be some who even see a little further than you do; and are lifted above you as well as above the fogs? There's nothing for it now but that you should go on. I fancy at the top of the mountain the air is

very clear, and loneliness is not so distressing to the natural man. As for atheist, to call you so doesn't make you one. The word is chiefly worth remembering because it represents acute pain on the part of your mother. Hard words break no bones."

"No; but hearts," said Tabitha.

"Nonsense!" responded Miss Sawday. "Make up your mind to think only how they are really fond of you. Strangers don't care a rap though you go the way of perdition. Some day they'll come round. You haven't got to stay down here long; Madame Renner can't spare you, nor can the club. And don't forget that all knowledge is good; and that whatever else you know or do not know, you should at least not be ignorant of your own people. Once fully understand their ways of thought, and you'll never be angry with them for doing as they do. It is because—those things are always because—you don't understand, not because you don't agree; for that matters little enough."

"I feel as if it took all the go and spirit out of me," said Tabitha.

"Don't feel then! Go on and do your duty for these few days longer. And you'll have change enough of mental air when you get back to Madame and the *Patriot*. It isn't as if you could alter it. They are your people. It takes more than one generation to grow a teacher of mankind; if you are not the final growth you can be the initial one. The beginning must come somewhere. You would like to be a prophet yourself in your own person; but to be the grandmother, or even the maiden aunt of one of the world's great ones is a better fate than befalls most of us. After all, it is natural enough. You want to reform your world; and the more the world stands in need of it, the less it likes to be reformed. You and I

should resent it if anybody wanted to reform us where we fancy we have settled down into the highest truth. There is only one thing certain: it will do you good to encounter opposition. Of course you and I think that you have sometimes to swallow a cruel overdose; but that is better than not to know the taste of so desirable a medicine. No heroine, except in a story-book, was ever trained by leading her out on a string down a smooth path bordered by flowers. Why do women think they are to be subject to new laws?"

"You don't know how tired I am," said Tabitha. "Often I think it will kill me. And there is Hilda."

"If you lose heart, you will die, I don't doubt that," said Miss Sawday slowly. "But we can't spare you, and there is Hilda. You must pluck up your courage and hold on. And you know in London I am always there to help you if you will let me. My bad times are some of them over. So will yours be presently; and then you can help the rest."

"I will try," said Tabitha. "It was silly of me to despair even for a moment; but I am always thinking they will understand and help me at last, and every year I am disappointed and they get worse. And because I am ill I feel it more."

As Tabitha came into Benscote her mother stood in the hall. She stopped to kiss Tabitha's white face.

"You look so weary and worn, my darling," she said. "Is there nothing I can do? You work too hard, and you don't take proper care of yourself. We can't let you wear yourself into an old woman before you are a young one. It is the work that is too hard."

"No; it's not the work, mamma," said Tabitha. "It's not the work."

"You don't eat enough, I expect. Not enough to keep a sparrow alive."

"It's not that either. I eat. I eat all I can afford to pay for."

Mrs. Vassie shrank back. Why should Tabitha introduce disputed topics in moments of expansion?

"You will say it is not anything I suggest. It must be something. You ought not to look so weary at your age."

"How can I tell?" said Tabitha. And, indeed, how could she? "Even granted that I knew, how could I tell?"

## CHAPTER XXIX

### VISITORS AT BENSCOTE

The situation was relieved by the advent at Ransham Lodge of Mr. Albert Willan. He came on a Friday, and two of the Benscote girls were invited to meet him. Ada suggested, and Mrs. Vassie cordially agreed, that Tabitha should be one of the girls; she knew Mr. Willan, or at least Mr. Willan's sister; and she had a new frock, very becoming, and should wear it. Mary, who is so very unselfish, and who never asserts herself, should accompany her. And as the weather was unsettled, and Tabitha not yet very strong, Ada thoughtfully proposed that the girls should stay the night at her house, and be fetched back in the pony-cart next morning. Ernest could not send them, because he and Mr. Willan intended to go for a long ride, far away over the hills. It would remind them, so Ernest had said, of their long rides when they were travelling together in out-of-the-way and dangerous districts years ago.

"And of course," said Ada, "I shall do everything that lies in my power to make Mr. Willan's stay agreeable. Ernest said he hoped I would, but he need not have asked me; I told him so. Think! If it hadn't been for Mr. Willan, Ernest might never have come home from that dreadful place alive. He must be a very brave man, and I'm sure I shall like him very much."

Mr. Albert Willan is one of those brave adventurers



who can give interesting accounts of their own doings. You can see how a handsome, pleasant-mannered, easy-tempered man, who had rolled far over the world, could, without serious effort, make an agreeable break in Benscote monotony. At Ransham they sat up till past midnight listening to travellers' tales over the drawing-room fire—an unheard-of hour; and when the ladies had gone to bed the two men sat talking on till Fewell almost regretted his lost liberty of action.

"I do like your friend, Tabby," said Ada, as they stood together in the girls' room. "He is so entertaining and nice. If his sister is at all like that, I can understand your being so fond of her. And did you notice how the children took to him? I do like a man who gets on with children. Generally the boy's so shy, but he wasn't a bit to-night. Even the baby cooed at him, and held out his dear little hand. They must have known (I do believe that babies know a lot of things by instinct) that he saved his father's life that dreadful night. And Mr. Willan's so nice in the house. And he tells such nice stories about Ernest. Ernest never tells about himself; I mean to scold him; he must have known how dearly I should love to hear. I wish Mr. Willan need not go away on Tuesday morning. I shall be quite sorry. I hope Ernest will ask him again."

"He's very seldom in England," said Tabitha. "Madame's like her brother, and yet she's not like him. Perhaps you would not like her so well; I like her ever so much better of the two."

"A woman hasn't so much to talk about that's amusing to hear," said Ada. "That was a funny story about the black man, wasn't it? And fancy the horror of being without water all that time! I sat and looked at Mr. Willan and Ernest and wondered how men can

go through with all that, and then at the end be just like other men, to look at, just when you meet them, you know. I like to think that Ernest has done so many brave things, and travelled such a lot. I can't travel myself, of course, and I never shall, because I can't bear to be away from the children, even for a day. But I like to know that he hasn't always stayed at home."

Next day the long ride finished on the Benscote road, and the two riders, splashed and thirsty, came in to beg for a cup of tea. Their appearance, so the girls thought, exactly befitted the heroes of romantic and blood-curdling tales; and the girls and their mother all gathered in the drawing-room hoping to hear of more adventures. But Willan was in quieter mood, and he talked nearly all the time to Mrs. Vassie. The opinion of a man of a certain age, who has seen much of the world, is valuable to home-abiding persons; and Mrs. Vassie found herself discussing the position of women in the great centres of population, while the girls amused themselves by trying to extract bits of adventure from their brother-in-law.

"Why didn't you ever tell us, Ernest," said Bella gaily, "about those men with turbans and scimitars who tried to get all your money? It was very clever of you to circumvent them. Who thought of the plan, you or Mr. Willan?"

"Oh! Willan. That was Willan," he declared. "It's ever so long ago, and I didn't suppose you'd care to hear. Besides, I can't tell these things in so thrilling a manner as he can. He sets out for that sort of thing."

"I am glad you think the position of women better than it was," said Mrs. Vassie on the other side of the room. "It is a very sad thing when there are a num-

ber of girls eating their hearts out at home in idleness; and it is what I never have approved of myself, though my own girls do not need to do anything. We are so grateful to your sister who has been such a good friend to our daughter Tabitha; she has helped her much in her career. I have always felt that the career of an authoress is a peculiarly worthy one; and Tabitha has always had a talent that way. Years ago, when she was at home, I did my best to encourage her; but she would not be content without trying her fortune in a wider sphere."

"In my humble opinion," said Mr. Willan, "Miss Vassie was quite right. In the literary world, as elsewhere, success depends a good deal on knowledge of technical and business details that can't be learned except in the great cities; can't be learned except in London, I might almost say; for that is the centre of the literary world now."

"And of course a woman who writes books that have a good sale may do a great deal of good in the world, and is likely to make a very good income. And she stays and writes in a comfortable home, instead of roaming about the world, as they have to do in some professions. I do think writing is a very nice profession for a woman."

"Excellent," assented Mr. Willan. "And I suppose there is every prospect that Miss Vassie may make a genuine success." Then he turned to Mary. "You were going to show me those plants that your brother sent from South America. I might be able to tell you what they are. I have been there a good many years."

"I think you have been everywhere, and know about everything, Mr. Willan," said Lizzie, who had given herself leave to escape from the school-room in order

to see with her own eyes this hero of wonderful adventure. "I wish you'd tell us some stories; it isn't fair you should tell them all to Ada and Tabby."

"Who invited you here, miss?" inquired Bella.

"Lizzie, Lizzie, are you sure you've finished your lessons?" said Mrs. Vassie. She turned to Mr. Willan. "She is in the school-room still; I agree with you; girls should not end their education too early. But this afternoon I suppose she thought she might come; she has heard her sisters talk so much about you."

Mr. Willan went out, surrounded by the girls. He was Tabitha's friend, when Ernest Fewell was not there to put in a stronger claim, and she took and was accorded some airs of showman.

Mrs. Vassie turned to her son-in-law. "He seems a very pleasant, agreeable man, your friend, Mr. Willan. I suppose Tabitha sees a good deal of him in town. You think he's—nice, and all that, Ernest?"

"Willan? I haven't seen much of him lately. Ladies always think he's a very pleasant fellow. Clever fellow, but not much of a stickler. A rolling stone, rather, and no money. But I believe it's one of the new crazes now-a-days to despise money. Tabitha was saying something of the kind to Ada the other day, I understood. Ada didn't quite see it. All very well when you've only yourself to think of. When there's a family all that sort of nonsense gets knocked out of you. It would be a very good thing if Tabitha found somebody to take her in hand, and teach her a little commonsense."

"Any man who married Tabitha would be a fortunate man," said Mrs. Vassie, rapidly putting herself into an attitude of defence. "She's really the most unselfish of all the girls, and if she were really fond of anybody, she'd be ready enough to devote herself.



And I quite agree with Mr. Willan that a thoroughly well educated woman is more of a companion for a man, especially when she gets older, as we must all do. I should like to know more of Mr. Willan's business or profession. We know very little of this Madame Renner, and Tabitha is a great deal there. Girls are young and enthusiastic; but of course as one gets on in life we know that we can't live without money. I often think the world would be a happier place if we could."

"Willan lives all right," said Fewell. "He means to settle down and to get something to do in London now."

A visitor was announced: Minna Ide. Three or four dogs with dirty feet rushed before and behind her, and effectually fixed Mrs. Vassie's thoughts on an annoying present.

"Oh! you've visitors," said Miss Ide in her gruff, harsh voice. "I did hear in the village that you'd a gentleman staying at Ransham, Mr. Fewell. I'd no idea I should find you here. I hope I'm not breaking into a family conclave or anything of that sort? A strange gentleman makes us all quite excited in these parts, you know."

"Pray sit down," said Mrs. Vassie. "Mr. Fewell will put the dogs out for you. Ernest, may I trouble you? Yes; we have a friend of my son-in-law here; you may remember to have seen him at the wedding. He is gone out with the girls; they had quite a treat yesterday, hearing travellers' tales. He has had a very good position in many places abroad. And he happens to be a brother of Tabitha's great friend, Madame Renner, who is a well-known writer. So it is all very pleasant."

"Indeed! Tabitha's friend?" Minna echoed inquiringly.



And then Mr. Willan and the girls came back, laughing, and all the girls except Tabitha talking at once. The horses were already standing at the door, and the girls swept out into the hall again to see the gentlemen start.

"He rides very well, I think, don't you?" said Bella, as the two vanished down the drive in the dusk. Then she sighed.

"I think he's extremely good-looking," said Mary. "Somehow, I never fancied your friend Madame Renner was at all like that. I thought she was more determined and severe, the sort of person you might be afraid of. You never told us much about her. Haven't you got her photograph?"

"When next you come to London, I will take you to see her," said Tabitha. "She is very handsome, certainly, a thousand times better looking than her brother. The only portrait that does her justice is one that she painted of herself. She paints beautifully, you know."

Opening the door had let the dogs in again, and Miss Ide with these companions soon departed. As she went home she thought on the promise of events. Here was Tabitha Vassie, who had done every single thing that a girl, who wishes to be admired by gentlemen, is told she must not do. Tabitha, so Miss Ide declared, was strong-minded, she was independent, she was not pretty, she did not dress well, she was no longer very young. And yet she had become acquainted, even somewhat intimately acquainted, with this gentleman, a very attractive gentleman. For want of something better to wonder over, Miss Ide surmised that there might even be "something between them." It was manifestly unfair. Tabitha had already taken for herself the best of the girls'

world; she had enjoyed independence and work at her profession, and rooms of her own where she did as she pleased: without doubt this sort of life has advantages over the life lived by one of five daughters at the Manor, or by one of four at the Priory. But then it had been an understood thing that the reward of home-keeping and docility comes to women in a married future. If men were going to play false, and when so much had been sacrificed for their approval were going to marry the girls who had sacrificed nothing, where would be even the poor remnant of justice that is promised to downtrodden womanhood?

"Well?" cried the sisters Ide in chorus as she entered the room.

"Did you see him?" asked Sissy.

"It's not the least true, of course," said the widow.

"I can't imagine any man being really happy with a girl like Tabitha Vassie," said Poppy. "Bella is so much nicer, or even Mary. I dare say he hasn't the least idea of what sort of a girl she really is. It would be almost kind to tell him, if one could."

"Much better let them be," said the widow. "They'll find out their mistake in time to make them both miserable."

"But have you heard anything really definite yet?" asked Sissy.

"Nothing definite, but I must say I thought it looked like it," said Minna. "He's very handsome, and it does seem very unfair that those two nice girls who've always stopped at home and helped their mother should have no chances, and this tiresome Tabitha should take a man in so. But she was always clever even at Benscote, and in London a girl gets cleverer if she has anything in her."

That night Mr. Fewell had another long talk with his friend, and later to his wife he said: "It would be a first-rate thing for Willan to marry and settle down. He has roamed long enough; and I shall do what I can to keep him up to it. And after all, your sister Tabitha is not everybody's money; she's so confoundedly independent; she'd never hit it off with most men; and 'tisn't every man would have the courage to try her. They'd have to live in town. We shouldn't see much of them. And of course your father would make them some allowance. I don't suppose it would be all a bed of roses; Tabitha would have to learn that she can't have everything her own way. 'Twould do her good."

"Oh! of course papa would," exclaimed Ada. "And it would be really such a good thing if Tabby were married, and then she wouldn't have to live alone. It sounds quite romantic too; she has always pretended to despise men. And I've told her it's all very well now; but what's she going to do when she gets old and wants some one to take care of her? I can't think how she can even dream of being happy without the dear babies; and she's fond of the children too when she's down here. It must be so very dull to live always with grown-up people. I think that Madame Renner never had any children, or if she had they died young, poor thing! Dear Tabby! I always wished some of them would marry; though I always thought it would be any of the others before Tabby. She doesn't seem that sort somehow. I think most men would be afraid of her. I am really glad. And we must think of a very nice present to give her."

Mrs. Vassie was not so precipitate. She waited over Sunday to make up her mind. Mr. Willan attended divine service as a matter of course in the morning,

and even said something about accompanying the girls in the evening, though, when the time came, he did not actually start. For a man, and a man who had travelled so much, even to suggest a second visit to church counted as one to the good. Mrs. Vassie was accustomed to put all candidates for her friendship through a series of tests or *viva voce* examinations in religion; in all of which an individual of the male sex could at any age easier get a pass.

As for Tabitha herself, concerning whom were made all these calculations and suggestions, she went back to London with a whole heart, and was not even distressed when Mr. Willan started off for an indefinite time on a long journey. She was kindly sympathetic to old Mrs. Willan, whom she found in the kitchen over a dish of potatoes on the morrow of her son's leave-taking. But the first person whose comfort Tabitha considered was Madame Renner, and she professed no sorrow.

If any one had questioned Miss Vassie, she would have declared that she was much too busy to spend time thinking about any man, and certainly about a friend of Ernest Fewell's. And the fact is that affairs of love are an episode in the life of the busy, and the whole of the life of the idle. Neither man nor woman can think two absorbing thoughts at one and the same time; and it is not with a corner of your mind that you can in these strenuous days earn bread-and-butter. If you throw your work on one side you will soon feel hungry; and it is not so much that a lover hungry for a piece of bread is a prosaic creature, as that he is a contradiction in terms. Humdrum though it may sound in the pages of a story, the fact remains that something to eat is necessary; while some one to love is not. Men and women have died of love, and will

die again; but they must die of hunger, if it lasts. So that while the struggle for love is the chief theme of romance, the struggle for food governs most action, Tabitha Vassie's amongst the rest.



## CHAPTER XXX

### THE SALE OF A PICTURE

Hilda's twenty-first birthday fell soon after Tabitha's return to town. Mr. Vassie was not sorry to come to an end of his guardianship. He shirked active responsibility of any kind. It was just as well, he said, that poor Bob's girl should go her own way, and do the best she could after her own fashion. Several times lately Mrs. Vassie had complained of her independent behaviour, and it was in accordance with his line of action to push an offending subject out of the family circle rather than to make within that circle an easy place. And though he had never actively opposed, he had not cordially agreed with Mrs. Vassie's plan for turning Hilda into a governess for the children. He had seen many places outside Benscote, and it did not appear to him, as to his wife, a matter of course that to live there was the best fate for his dead brother's child. Mrs. Vassie had fashioned Benscote life; her husband had only let it be fashioned. And now, where Hilda was concerned, he was content to let things take their course. Hilda had her own money, and could oppose her aunt if she chose. So long as she stayed at Benscote her uncle would make her welcome; if she chose to go he would not bar her path. Hilda had a mind of her own; what she wanted she would get. It was much best to let women have things out between them. So that when Hilda, having signed her papers at the lawyer's, set out by his side

to walk to Tabitha's rooms, he was not surprised to hear her say—

"And now, uncle, since they tell me I'm a grown-up woman, I must thank you for all your kindness to me when I wasn't old enough to live by myself. It was father's wish. But he wished me to work. And now I can go and live with Tabitha and begin to be a doctor. Father wished me to be a doctor. I remember your talking about it with him. Tabitha will be glad to have me. We've always arranged that between us. Tabitha doesn't take care of herself. But you took care of me, and now I shall take care of her and pay it back. We shall be quite rich living together."

"Ah!" said Mr. Vassie. "Have you spoken to your aunt?"

"Aunt knows. She must have known all along. I wasn't a grown-up woman yesterday, when I left Benscote; but I told her what I meant to do as soon as I was old enough, when Tabby was so ill last year. She did not say anything. And she is not my guardian; she did not know father at all well."

"I thought your aunt had made other plans," said Mr. Vassie. "But you young women will do as you like. My own children don't ask me. It's like living in a republic. You can do as you please, I suppose. What do you want me to do?"

"Nothing—nothing at all, except be nice. Father wished me to work—to work seriously, you know."

"I don't know what he'd have liked; things are different to what they were when he was here. Women take their own way. And you were nothing but a child."

"I always know what he'd like," said Hilda, eagerly; "because, when I'm not sure at the beginning, I think what is really the right thing to do, and he must like

me to do that. It must please him when I do the best I know how."

"Ah! indeed," said Mr. Vassie, vaguely assenting. "Bob was a good fellow. We all miss him." He was thinking that, had Bob been living, he might have known what to do with a large family of daughters, who were, especially Tabitha, a source of irritation to a quiet man. "It's a queer thing to want to be a doctor for a woman. Geoffrey finds it hard work."

"Geoffrey's ideas of hard work and mine are not the same," said Hilda. "We women don't expect to be pleased. We are taught always, from the day we are born, that we've got to do what is right; the boys are taught always, from the day they're born, that they've got to do what they like; it makes a lot of difference."

"You think that, do you?" said Mr. Vassie, musing. "You can't expect a young fellow to be always thinking of his duty. It doesn't do to ask too much; they'd fly off, you know."

"But you expect a young girl to be always thinking of hers," said Hilda, smartly. "She won't fly."

"A girl's got to keep within certain lines, you know," said Mr. Vassie. "You'd never know where you are else. There's the home to be thought of; that's the thing. And the girls will never do much at professions. Your poor father wished it; but I've no great opinion of such things."

"Tabitha's going to make a great success one day. And so'll I."

"Poor success! She's got a trick of writing, I suppose. I used to write when I was a boy. Such things run in families. But she has barely kept herself. A clever girl ought to do better than that; and a boy would if he'd anything in him. But the fact is her

writing (I've never seen any of it) is not up to a man's level."

"I've seen some. It's very good," said Hilda. "I'm sure it is. And she's lots to say. Tabby's ever so much cleverer than I am, and lots cleverer than the boys. Why! I can do a lot of Geoffrey's work even now. Tabby ought to have had a better chance. She ought to have had a good start, and some money. Then she'd have done a lot by now."

"I don't come to you to know what I ought or ought not to have done," said Mr. Vassie tartly. "I use my own judgment."

"I didn't mean to blame you, uncle," said Hilda. "Only we all make mistakes, and then are sorry afterwards; except those who make mistakes and aren't sorry, I suppose. Tabitha has done so much without help that I always wonder what she could have done with it. She might have been quite grand and rich by this time."

"I don't think much of grand women," said Mr. Vassie. "The plain old-fashioned sort is enough for me. A woman's duty is to make herself pleasant and to keep the house together. What's the good of half the modern literature that's written? If you want books there are plenty of good books already, that no one reads. And as for mistakes, we act according to the best of our judgment, and if I'd my time over again I should do the same. It isn't for you to say your aunt or I have made mistakes."

"Would you? I'm sorry," said Hilda, leaving her uncle to fix the place for her sorrow. "Well, here we are! And Tabby's expecting us."

Tabitha had invited Miss Adnitt to share the feast, and in return for the invitation, that young lady undertook to entertain the guest in her studio while the meal

was preparing opposite. And as she had no idea of the respective size of incomes, her own being precarious and no sooner in hand than flung away again, she nourished a secret hope of selling a picture to Mr. Vassie, of whose first appearance at Miss Meal's as a reputed millionaire she still preserved a lively recollection. She had put on a new frock, and her large brown eyes looked out from beneath heavy eaves of frizzled hair. She had decked her rooms with flowers, and set out her pictures to best advantage.

Mr. Vassie had not been in a studio for many years, and the smell of the paint awakened old memories. There were women he had known time gone by resembling Miss Adnitt. Her type is one that persists through the ages. The memories were agreeable.

"I have heard so much about you, Mr. Vassie," she said, when she had fixed him in her most comfortable chair. "You, of course, have never heard about me, but then I'm an insignificant person. I have heard Miss Vassie say how much you read: I'm an ignorant little thing. But I paint, a little. And I made Miss Vassie promise you should come and look at my pictures. I should so very much value your opinion of them, if you could spare the time and trouble to give it."

"I don't know much about pictures," said Mr. Vassie. "They're pretty enough, but I'm no judge."

"Ah! but that's just it. I feel so much more confidence in the honest opinion of any one who's not professional, and who can't by any possibility be jealous of poor little me. Outsiders often see where a thing's wrong, when we've been poring over it for hours in vain."

"My opinion is certainly that of an outsider," said Mr. Vassie. "I shall look at your pictures with great pleasure, I'm sure. Where is Tabitha, did you say?"



"She's seeing to things opposite. Her room is small, and we're going to have lunch there. If I might show you this? I did it in the country last summer. I think the country should not be unlike the part where you live. You see I know all about Benscote. You were a notable person at Miss Meal's, where I first met Miss Vassie. Do you think the colouring's fairly good?" Miss Adnitt as she spoke kept her eyes fixed on Mr. Vassie's face, watching for the faintest indication of admiration or of boredom.

"Excellent," said he; "if not rather too purple?"

"In the middle distance, you mean? Yes; that was just one of the points that I wanted an unprejudiced opinion about. I must see that it is altered. Here is another, showing less of that defect."

Mr. Vassie's eyes wandered round the room, and rested on the wall.

"That is Italy, surely. I think I recognize it. Though it is many years since I was there."

"Italy! Surely!" Miss Adnitt in a trice had the sketch off the wall and set in a good light. "You know Italy well, of course? I was there for six weeks last year, a poor little six weeks. I'm so glad you think I have caught the colouring. I must go again some day; but for us poor women there are a good many preliminaries to be thought of. And I have not Miss Vassie's luck in having relations at my back."

"Painting always seems to me a very nice employment for women," said Mr. Vassie. "But I'm sorry to say none of my daughters paint or draw. And I suppose it pays pretty well; better than writing, at any rate?" He looked round the studio.

"Oh! one just gets along."

"What might you get for a thing of that size?" asked Mr. Vassie, wishing to get an accurate information as

basis for calculation of income; and quite unwittingly gladdening the heart of the artist.

She hesitated. Pictures are not sold at a fixed price according to size, unless the size of the purchaser's pocket be accounted for in the reckoning; but Mr. Vassie might not be aware of that, and if he was not he would take her first price to be her last, and act accordingly. She feared lest she might ask too little and regret it; or too much and lose all. Her funds were low. She wanted a few pounds to go on with. And there was a bill owing for frames. She looked at Mr. Vassie again from under her overhanging hair, and saw that his coat was shabby; which might mean miserliness or poverty. Miss Adnitt herself never wore shabby coats when she went out visiting.

"I beg your pardon," he asked idly. "Perhaps it is not for sale."

"Not at all," Miss Adnitt hastened to reply. "I should be only too glad to sell it. Say ten pounds, if you fancy the thing. Or no; not ten; Tabitha is my great friend; eight—eight pounds. Has Mrs. Vassie been in Italy too? I know Miss Vassie has not."

"Well!" said Mr. Vassie doubtfully. "Perhaps something smaller. I have a good deal of business in town the next two days. A thing like that would be in my way."

"Do you imagine I should let you carry a parcel?" asked Miss Adnitt, reproachfully. "I do not treat my kind patrons so. But don't decide in a hurry. Come again, and perhaps you'll find something better. Eight pounds is a great deal of money, at least I know it seems a great deal to me."

"I can't say it goes far with me," said Mr. Vassie, smiling, and more inclined to take the picture now that he was begged to defer his decision. The picture was

a pretty one. It would look well in his study, and would remind him of pleasant days spent years ago. And eight pounds was nothing for a man in his position to spend; it was indeed hard if he ought to hesitate before laying out, on any object that took his fancy, so mean a sum. And, talking of position, it might improve Tabitha's position if it were known that her father was a man of means who patronized the arts; not merely for the arts' sake, indeed, but as a sure indication of spare cash in the pocket.

"Well! I don't know," said Mr. Vassie again. "Eight pounds, did you say?"

"It's just a trifle to you, one way or the other, I know," said Miss Adnitt. "Of course to me it seems a lot. I think you know the Lasletts? Didn't Miss Vassie tell me they were some sort of relation to her? Mr. Laslett bought one of my pictures the other day. It was just about the size of the one you like. That's the one thing I envy Miss Vassie—her relations. It is such a help to have money behind you, and all around, you may say."

That clinched the bargain. Miss Adnitt was a talker, and would talk about the purchase. And the painting is certainly very pretty, and not ill done. Mr. Vassie had passed years of mornings in his study, where not a thing ever altered except by age. If as a young man Mr. Vassie had looked forward, he could scarcely have admired the prospect of this monotonous existence; and I have no doubt that he felt grateful to this bright and cheery young lady, for having been the cause (of course unconscious) of this purchased ornament to his room. Furthermore, it was something to talk about at lunch, and it kept them off the vexed question of Hilda's future.

Tabitha had contrived a passable luncheon, by dint

of much planning and some outlay; and Mr. Vassie took it as a fair sample of Tabitha's ordinary. He had been shut up in his study during the busy housekeeping hours of Benscote life, and knew as little as a man may of what goes to the making of such comfort as he considers his daily due. And after luncheon, in the studio, sipping a cup of excellent coffee that Tabitha had made for him, he thought how all things were for the best in a world that is easier in fact than in theory. "Let bygones be bygones," he said to himself. "She is evidently doing pretty well now."

Even Hilda, he thought, was perhaps young and hot-headed and had spoken hastily. As one gets on in years, according to Mr. Vassie's mode of progression, one learns that there is next to nothing in the world worth exciting oneself for; the which faith is a great help to the calm and contented life of a student of books.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### EVERYBODY'S OPINIONS

Mr. Vassie was well content with himself, with Tabitha, and with life when he dined that night with the Tom Lasletts. He sat near his hostess, and there were several persons between him and Tabitha, who, as her father was surprised and pleased to find, both talked and looked better than many of the company. He had never before seen his daughter in society. And, accustomed to take his opinions second-hand from a narrow selection of books, he now took his opinion concerning Tabitha second-hand from these present specimens of a narrow section of society. Mrs. Laslett's guests appeared to find Tabitha rather interesting; straightway, without any consciousness of a change of front, he began to feel that for a girl to work or earn was not a decidedly objectionable practice. He even smiled as if he were flattered, when Mrs. Laslett, singing Tabitha's praises with intent, told him that they two bore a strong resemblance.

"We always think she is like her mother," said Mr. Vassie.

"I don't see the least likeness," declared Mrs. Laslett. "And clearly, Tabitha takes her brains from your side of the family. Poor Bob was a man of quite unusual parts; and I've heard it said that your grandfather was a very able man for that time of day."

"So he was. No doubt about that. You are quite right. We boys used to think a great deal of him. So he was."



"I don't think any of your boys inherit the family talent. Geoffrey is a dear good fellow. We are all very fond of him; but he'll not set the Thames afire."

"Ah! we didn't hear so much about girls' intelligence in our young days, Lydia. We were content with the native, womanly charm, without any effort. The rough work of the world was left to us men, and vulgar striving; and I can't but feel it was better so. What we want in female society is rest, you know, to be off the stretch, relaxation. A man can't be always working his brain. Still, it is a good thing girls should have some employment, if it makes them happy, and if they do not marry to contract home ties. I was reading a book by a well-known man, quite of that way of thinking."

Kitty, the prettiest of the Laslett girls, was seated by Mr. Vassie's side.

"I've often thought," she said demurely, "that there's a mistake somewhere that no one has come to the bottom of, in that so many women are born clever just now while some men are born stupid. Do you think it can have anything to do with all this fashionable talk about heredity? It seems to me that if the men could have all the brains that are going they might give the women all the good looks instead; I dare say most women would agree most of our difficulties would come to an end. And anything so tiresome and perplexing as making women clever when you don't want them to be, can't be a work of God; can it be, do you think?" Kitty fixed her blue eyes on Mr. Vassie's face. "They tell me it isn't the fashion to believe in the devil now; and of course you're modern and learned, Cousin Ned, so you don't believe in him; or else I used to think that it must be the work of the devil. If I were wise, that's what I

should try to find out. It would set so many things right."

"Ah!" said Mr. Vassie. "You're lucky not to be wise if it would set you groping among questions of diabolical agency." He sipped his wine. "Difficult questions; most difficult. In my young days I went into that pretty deeply."

"Kitty!" said Mrs. Laslett, frowning over merry eyes and shaking her head. "Kitty! I can't have my dinner spoilt by such deep discussions. Do you want to give us all the nightmare?"

"There is a proverb," said Mr. Vassie, encouraged to strengthen the motherly rebuke, "which may be paraphrased: 'A young lady may ask questions that a man of experience cannot answer.'"

"Yes," rejoined Kitty; "that's what I think; if young ladies were all like me and could be fitted into the original of that proverb, it would make things so much simpler for the wise men, wouldn't it now?"

"Tabitha's friends, Madame Renner and Miss Sawday, are both very able women," said Mrs. Laslett, not jumping as far as she intended, in her desire to change the subject speedily. "Madame Renner, especially, is brilliant, only she takes up too many things to be really successful. And I hear her paper is not doing at all well."

"I have met Madame Renner's brother. He is a friend of Ernest Fewell's," said Mr. Vassie. "A very agreeable man. He made himself most acceptable at Benscote."

"I should have thought he'd have been the very last man you'd have liked. He's abroad now, I believe."

"Somebody said," observed Kitty, "that it was that brother of Madame Renner who wrote those articles in *The Piccadilly Journal* that were so much talked about.

He happened to have been to the place, and not many people have; it was one of those lucky hits; there wasn't much in them."

"Yes; we did hear that. Kitty is by way of writing a little bit herself, so she has a fellow-feeling for brethren of the craft."

"Stories, eh?" asked Mr. Vassie, looking at Kitty's pretty face.

"Oh! anything; nothing much," said Kitty, modestly looking down, to hide her laughing eyes. "I am a very stupid person, and a very little is all I can reach to. I shall never be a celebrated writer, like Tabitha."

"Tabitha's pretty well thought of?" asked Mr. Vassie of his cousin. "She seems to be doing well. Of course it helps a girl to get on to have a family behind her. Her mother and I think it as well that some of the girls should employ themselves."

"If she doesn't get carried away by impossible, reforming sort of people. Madame Renner is rather of that sort, I'm afraid."

"But that's so difficult again, about reforms and new plans, you see," objected Kitty. "Women are not to do what men do, for fear of competition; they ought to find new jobs all alone by themselves; everybody sensible agrees to that; and so if they begin to mend something that men are too busy to mend, or haven't cared to have mended, it seems to me that it's very hard to blame them. I remember what you said about asking questions, Cousin Ned," said Kitty; "and perhaps you, the wise man, can't answer this. If we women mayn't do what the men do, and mayn't do what the men leave alone, why not say at once that we ought to sit and do nothing?"

Mrs. Laslett rose and saved Mr. Vassie the trouble of a reply.

"Don't you let Tom keep you long!" she said. "I want to talk to you about old times, and hear how everybody is; your sisters, and all the rest of them. Kitty shall be sent to bed if she is so tiresome."

"My dear Kitty," she began as soon as they were in the drawing-room, "you really ought not to be so undependable at dinner. You know I wanted you to make things go off well, and to keep Ned in a good mind; and you were airing all your pet notions, and trying to make a fool of him. I sat on thorns."

"Dearest mother," explained Kitty, "it was as safe as the Bank. It amused me, and didn't hurt him. He hasn't the slightest idea that I set him posers, and even less that I intended to do so. And you did butter him up so nicely, pretending to account for all Tabitha's brains as a kind of overplus of his own. It was lovely. I do think a certain class of men like to think they've given to their daughters things (brains and so forth) that they've no use for. And Cousin Ned has such a muddled head, poor thing!"

"My dear child, I'm not wrapped up in Ned Vassie, as you know. But he was accounted clever as a young man. And neither you nor Tabitha made yourself out of an original mould, manufactured for the occasion. You may struggle and talk as you like; but Tabitha's her father's daughter, as like him at some moments as two peas in a pod. You did not know Ned Vassie as a young man. He wasn't a fool then, and therefore Tabitha is not one either. He made a mistake in marrying the woman he did. She turned his soul sick with a surfeit of worship. From what he said I expect he's done pretty well by Tabitha. He doesn't seem against girls working. It must have been his wife; I never liked her."

Kitty laughed, being one of those young persons who

find life an agreeable experience, taken with or without theories.

"I believe he only agrees with you because it's less trouble than to differ. And to help Tabitha was more trouble than to let her alone. But I'll be good to him when he comes in. Father won't keep him long, we know. I will get him to tell me tales of old times; that will amuse him, because he'll have to do all the talking; and such information alway comes in usefully, in these days, when everyone is looking backwards and hoping to find a Utopia, which, by the way, isn't there."

Mr. Vassie, when he came in, remembered his picture, and turned himself and the conversation towards the water-colours adorning the wall.

"Bought something of Miss Adnitt's? Who's she? Do we know her, my dear?" said Mr. Laslett, appealed to. "Lady Pounsford's *protégée*? Ah! I believe I did. Where was it put, Lydia? Not much worth having; no great price, a ten-pound note or so. Old Lady Pounsford asked me to take something, and I couldn't well refuse. As for you, Vassie, with your family, I wonder you can afford charities to other people's girls. Are you going to give the thing to your wife to hang up somewhere?"

"Nothing much; no," said Mr. Vassie. "Rather pretty colouring; a kindness to the girl."

"These are all by well-known men. Now that, hanging there, is something like, if you're fond of pictures," said Mr. Laslett, turning to another guest.

"If yours is like the sketch Tom brought home, it's a very pretty little bit," said Mrs. Laslett, quickly interpreting her cousin's feelings. "I'm sure your wife will be delighted. Tom didn't think to give his to



me, and I had to take it. It's up-stairs in my room now. You went for your wedding trip to Italy; it will recall old times, won't it? So did we: but Tom is subject to sad lapses of memory about such fond things."

## CHAPTER XXXII

### MONEY OR A LIFE

It was not to be expected that Mrs. Vassie should take as calmly as her husband did the news of Hilda's speedy departure from Benscote. It came upon her as a surprise and upset her plans. She had heard Hilda say she would go and live with Tabitha, that time, now long ago, when Tabitha was ill; but Mrs. Vassie told herself that girls say a great many things that they don't mean, and that the best way is to take no notice of them. She thought it a blessed circumstance that youthful energy is generally joined to youthful vacillation; for, were things otherwise, it would be more than ever difficult for the elders to get their rightful way.

It was disappointing that Hilda should refuse to stay at Benscote. We who look dispassionately on the world, are not surprised to find that in homes, as in everything else, one man's meat is another man's poison. The house and furniture that I pay a price for, and have chosen with my eyes open out of all the world, would not exactly, as it now stands, meet the desires of any single person on the face of the earth. There is no creature living who would enter it and not alter it much or little. And a large number of persons, whose taste differs widely from mine, would refuse to live in it gratis and rent free. So well we recognize this discrepancy of tastes that it does not occur to us to sell or let our homes as they stand. Yet Mrs.

Vassie, who had spent a generation in making Benscote Manor to her mind; and Mr. Vassie, to whom the home of his fathers represented the one spot upon earth where a man should choose to live, thought it most perverse of Hilda to say in so many words that she would rather spend her money on a home made to fit herself, in another part of the world. They wanted, in fact, to sell to Hilda a share of Benscote as it stood, with rights strictly limited: Hilda refused the bargain. It was as though Hilda had depreciated the actual value of the estate; as though it had been put to auction with a high reserve, and there had not been a single bid. It was disappointing also that Hilda upset the plans for teaching the children. "If a girl asks for something to do," said Mrs. Vassie, "it would show a better spirit if she did what lay before her at the moment, instead of looking far ahead,"—to a time that her elders had naturally rather not consider. "The girls of the present day," said Mrs. Vassie, "are all alike; they think only of themselves."

Still, there was nothing for it but to submit. The law declares that a woman is old enough to control her own life at twenty-one, let the position of her father be what it may. Of course Mrs. Vassie declared that the law was based upon a mistake, and that the daughter of a well-to-do house is never fit to control her own life as long as she has parents of any age to control her.

And Hilda is one of those annoying persons who will give and demand reasons for action, stating unpleasant facts, which, in polite society and among persons who are affectionate, are always concealed. Facts are such hideous things, especially when they relate to age or money. Girls ought to feel properly; and what more is wanted?

"Four years, five years, how many years is it since I've been here?" said Hilda. "You've been very good to me; but the time's seemed very long. I'm really glad to hear you say that my money has been convenient to you all this time, and that you'll miss it. I like to be sure that you'd rather have me and the money than neither of us. Father is glad of that too, I'm sure."

"My dear, where your father's gone to they do not think anything at all about money," said Mrs. Vassie. "But with this large house and nice place it does seem a pity that you can't stay here and pursue your studies, if you want to study. I've no doubt we could contrive for you to have a quiet place to yourself for a few hours every day."

"I don't doubt about the quiet," said Hilda, smiling. "It's too quiet for me. And if I go and live with Tabby, she'll get the benefit of my money, such as it is. You'll be glad of that. Tabby's never had a fair chance. And I'm sure you'd much rather Tabby had a little money than keep it here?"

"As to that," said Mrs. Vassie, "Tabitha chose her own way, and if she was not very well off it was her own fault. She could have stayed at home if she had wished. It's a very doubtful blessing, I think, all these young women setting up in man's work. Geoffrey tells me the competition is very severe as it is. And it is very painful to think that your only idea is to escape from us the first possible moment; I had promised to help Geoffrey this term with some extra expenses he's had. I don't know what your uncle will say."

"I'm not the least anxious to help Geoffrey," said Hilda. "Not directly nor indirectly, now that the decision rests with me. Men are so wise and so strong they can very well take care of themselves."

"Of course if these strong-minded women take the bread out of men's mouths, it will only make things worse instead of better. For then how can men marry?"

"How can they indeed? Methinks we shall survive it even if a few of them do live and die bachelors. I don't see that marriage is such an unmixed blessing. Look at Ada!"

"These are things a young girl can know nothing about," said Mrs. Vassie, blushing, though Hilda's face was unmoved.

"Do the old women know any more?" said Hilda. "If they'd find an argument that stands on four feet, square with the rest of the facts of the universe, and if they would tell it to us straight in plain words, then we should know what to think. But you don't think, aunt, that the world, and especially the marrying world, is quite perfect now, and you haven't got any recipe to make it perfect. Why mayn't we have a chance of finding out what we can; something better, let us hope?"

"You are going to work the wrong way. Marriage is the ordinance of God. The Almighty has wisely ordained trials."

"Granted," said Hilda. "But if, as you say, the men can't afford to marry us, you wouldn't wish to make it a trial that we can't marry them? And Ada's an old woman before she's ever been a young one. She says and you say that you don't want another baby. She's worn and ill. The last baby wasn't a very nice baby. There's nothing particularly nice there, to my mind."

"I don't know what young girls are thinking of to discuss such matters, and you only twenty-one. At your age I hadn't thought of such things at all. And Mary was nearly a month old."



"It's lain before me. Ada's an object lesson. I can't choose but think. I know nothing; I'm honestly asking you, aunt. When father was here he would tell me anything that I asked him."

"I've nothing to say. And I'm sure no father in his senses would speak to his girls on such matters."

"I'm not to think and find out for myself; and nobody will tell me. It seems to me rather unfair. It isn't as if it were a thing that didn't matter a pin, somebody else's business that I shouldn't interfere with."

"And I think you should remember," said Mrs. Vassie, "that it is not at all certain that Tabitha will want to have you, for any length of time; for a continuance, that is. Circumstances might arise, as even you might see, that would induce her to leave Kerr's Mansions. Unless you, who are sure you know so much, fancy you are in your cousin's confidence?"

Mrs. Vassie spoke, hoping to be told more than she knew.

"I can't think how you can like that horrible man," said Hilda, with a lamentable lack of diplomatic language, for so delicate a topic; "I'm sure Tabby's too good for him to black her boots. She'd never look at him. She's not like silly girls who are crazy to marry just any one."

Such conversations reconciled Mrs. Vassie as nothing else could have done to the loss of her husband's niece. If these were her notions at twenty-one, what might she not develop into? What might she not say to the girls or even to the boys? Tabitha, at her worst, had never talked like that. If it was not all innate perversity in Hilda, the world must be moving fast in a wrong direction. When Hilda asked for her aunt's cut-and-dried opinions on such perplexing points, it

was as if a pistol were held to Mrs. Vassie's head, demanding a purse which she was known not to possess, or a life which she did not wish to give up till the boys and girls were out in the world and needed her no longer. I believe that Hilda was, after the manner of the young, solely interested in her own perplexities, and not occupied with other people's; but to Mrs. Vassie it seemed otherwise: Hilda had guessed her secret grief, and had laid a rough finger on the sore spot, with no care for the pain she gave. Hilda's sharp and unloving eyes had seen the trouble in her heart; and she had dragged it forth, with taunts for her unsettled mind on this most difficult of subjects.

Mrs. Vassie wrote to Tabitha, begging her to try and influence her cousin for good during the short time that they might be together.

'She is young, and very opinionated, and inclined to consider points that no nice girl imagines she has a mind on. If she came to any harm I should never forgive myself. I knew her mother when first she married, and she was such a particularly nice woman; and Hilda would have been so different if she had had a mother. And I cannot but think that a doctor's studies are very unsuitable for a girl. Geoffrey tells me a good deal; things, of course, that he couldn't speak of except to his mother. I scarcely know how even a man can go in for it voluntarily; and when Hilda has nothing to gain, having already an income sufficient for a woman to live upon comfortably, it is indeed surprising.

"Your father and I have been talking things over. You know how heavy our expenses are. And now that Hilda talks of coming to share your rooms you will have less rent to pay. I have been thinking that perhaps you could do without a dress allowance now.

Even ten pounds, if you could do with that much less, is not so easily come by. Let me know what you think. Papa was pleased to see you had such comfortable rooms; he spoke quite warmly of your little *ménage*. You are, I am sure, a very good manager. But of course girls can do with a little. They have comparatively no tastes or claims upon them. Hilda, having no brothers, takes very extreme views, which I am sure you don't share. It ought to make at least ten pounds difference having Hilda to share expenses. I feel that she has treated your uncle and me with a want of consideration and gratitude. But girls in these days do not seem to consider gratitude to their elders a duty."

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### TABITHA'S VISITOR

The months went by merrily. The medical school course was not to begin till October, but meanwhile there was no time to lose. Even Tabitha, with her club and her newspaper, her dependent friends and her ever-growing circle of acquaintance, was not busier than Hilda, who contrived to find acute pleasure in everything, including her own ignorance. Every day she found herself on the threshold of some untrodden way of knowledge. At Benscote she had thought she knew much; and she was beginning to fear lest she would search in vain for the answers to the many interesting questions that propound themselves to the young and eager. Now, in London, she was sure that, beyond her present ken, the answers to them all lay somewhere hidden; she was sure that in the long life of which she had as yet only tasted the beginning, time would be found to fulfil all her longings. Unsatisfied now, she thirsted after knowledge or information of any kind. For who can predict beforehand on which side of life the answer is written plainest? Hilda Vassie's coach still holds her in remembrance as a nearly perfect pupil, one whose joy in learning overflowed upon the teacher. Tabitha's more varied list of subjects for the articles in *The Woman Patriot* was, I judge, largely due to suggestions from Hilda, and to Hilda's reading of many fresh pages of life, from which she quoted copiously.

Hilda had no qualms of conscience because she thus enjoyed herself. On the contrary, she considered that a good dose of happiness was no more than her due. "Work's done much better if you're happy than if you're wretched," she declared. "That's one great fault of women; they're so anxious to be miserable, of course men let them be. If you wish to be put upon, there are always plenty to oblige you."

"We are so happy together, and there are so many miserable people in the world," said Tabitha.

"That's why I'm learning," said Hilda, in youthful assurance. "Find out why they are miserable, and then the causes can be removed. According to your plan, you'd only tinker up the effects, and make two, yourself and another, miserable, instead of the other one alone."

"I'm never really miserable. And it seems to me as if I ought," said Tabitha.

"And it's borne in upon me that you oughtn't, especially starve yourself," said Hilda. "Some day when we wake in the morning you'll just be a dead man. Charity begins at home. And I mean you and me to have good square feeds every day. She that doesn't work shouldn't eat; but she that doesn't eat can't work."

"You're big and strong; you want it. I think perhaps now I'm older I want it more too. I get so soon tired. Of course you ought to be happy. I'm so glad you are. I used to be afraid, years ago, that you mightn't be."

"You've no prejudice against happiness, *per se*," laughed Hilda. "That is the illogicalness of your mind. It is only for yourself that you object to it. Any one might think I was a boy or a man (which, thank goodness, I'm not) and you were aunt talking.



It's a woman's first duty to make her brothers happy; her last to make herself so. If your papa is pleased, what more can you want? It would be absurd to want to please your own taste or conscience."

Tabitha laughed. "I am going to make you very happy to-night," she said. "Madame Renner has sent me two tickets for the theatre; they came in to the *Patriot*. Town's empty now. Will you take Miss Adnitt or some one?"

"Why not take you?"

"I never go. I promised mamma I wouldn't years ago; and there is so little where I can please her."

"Pleasing somebody else at your own expense! She doesn't know, and wouldn't care now if she did know. She thinks you go. I know she does. I've heard her say so."

"She should know me better when she made me promise. It's not altogether to please her; it's to satisfy myself. I made a resolution at Benscote when I first came up that I would never oppose them at Benscote unless I felt I really ought to. This is almost all that is left of the charges they laid upon me; the rest have been absolutely impossible. It only means that I deprive myself of a pleasure."

"It's a duty!" cried Hilda. "A duty to see everything that's going on. How are you to form opinions if you don't know? Suppose we'd children of our own some day! Would you like them to be able to say that we knew so little of the world that all but one of our commands was impossible, and that one was really ridiculous? Aunt has been to the theatre herself, and uncle often goes."

"It wasn't that. It was going alone, without some one older. Now and again I've given a ticket to some older person to go with me; once I took poor old

Mealy. But they don't care about turning out of a night, nor I with them, if the truth must be told."

"What a thing it is to have a tender conscience!" cried Hilda. "I'll go, but it's the last time without you. I shall write home. You shall have the credit for your obedience; if I can get it for you. I know what aunt will say; even if she remembers she ever said such a thing, she will wonder what on earth induced you to attend to that monition when you disregard so many others."

"I always hope that some day they will understand."

Hilda shook her head. "If you'd give up hoping for the impossible: if you'd give up caring what they say or do, it would be ever so much better. They'd be just as well pleased and you'd be better off. Can't you see that that's just where the difference between you lies? They believe they've reached absolute truth, especially in matters relating to women; and they want to sit still upon it. You and I think that absolute truth is not a fixture, but a progression. And we're sure that in matters relating to girls the world needs to progress pretty fast and pretty far. So whatever we do we shall never stand still till we die—nor then."

"Some times I almost wish I could stand still," said Tabitha. "One gets so very tired."

"Oh! no. I never wish that for a single minute. And you wouldn't if you weren't feeling ill and good-for-nothing. You've never been the same since you were ill in London before the last time you went to Benscote. I love it! There's lots to do, and lots to find out. The other students are so funny; they do amuse me so. I've never seen people at all like them. And to-day the lecturer said that some one was wanted, really wanted, to look into something to do with

women and the thing he was telling us about, you know. Only a woman could do it. I thought directly, Why not I? I looked up. I believe I caught his eye, and nearly nodded. I hope not quite, for it would have been absurd, you know. He's a very great man, and I'm only a beginner."

Hilda and Miss Adnitt went to the theatre; and Tabitha, finding herself in the rare possession of a spare half-hour, sat down and thought. Was Hilda right, so that her mistake throughout had been too much obedience instead of too little? Is not flat disobedience sometimes a very plain duty? And in years of discretion, should not the presumption in favour of obedience be due to experience rather than to authority, or to accident of relationship? It was with difficulty that Tabitha could recall any single instance where obedience to her parents had seemed to lead on the right path; nor any one where disobedience had in the end led to a manifestly wrong issue. Turning-points had come in life's ways: not once could Tabitha rejoice that she had taken, or regret that she had not taken, the way pointed out by Mrs. Vassie. And that being so, what sense was there in supposing that the future would differ from the past? It might be wisest to break at once and forever with her natural or trained instincts to obey wherever it was possible, or did not cost too much to the conscience; and for the future either to take advice only where it was likely to be useful, or to guide her life only by the light of her own judgment and common-sense.

It would have been wisest, perhaps. But Tabitha, like the rest of us, was the child of her earliest environments; and she would never shake herself free of the notion that some day, some time, obedience to the Benscote oracle would fall in with the fulfilment of her

highest aspirations. That was the goal she looked forward to; one (as we outside can all plainly see) quite impossible to reach. At Mrs. Vassie's time of life she would never make any very great advance in experience of life or modes of thought; and Tabitha, who was still young and moving, was far ahead of her already. They could never meet nor stand on the same ground of belief, in any sphere of existence to which our rules of thought apply.

The range of thought upon which Tabitha had entered was endless; but, fortunately, the time at her disposal was limited. She had promised Hilda to put up a shelf, and arrange some draperies for the better adornment of the tiny sitting-room, of which they both made a sort of toy and pet, decking it always in some novel fashion with flowers and ornaments bought with their spare shillings. Tabitha fetched the step-ladder and mounted it, hammer in hand. She was busily engaged, and had happily forgotten her philosophic and moral doubts, when she heard the housekeeper letting herself in with her pass-key. Thinking only that the woman had come out of hours to do some forgotten work, she went on busily with her interesting task, perched securely on the topmost step, and wholly engrossed in that combination of artistic effort and handicraft which is acknowledged to be the best corrective for anxiety of mind. Then her door opened; but she was too well used to have her rooms invaded at odd times by stray acquaintances to take much notice, and an important fold of drapery was hanging in the balance.

Mr. Albert Willan stood in the middle of the room, close to her, before she saw him. She folded her hands, and sat staring astonished from her perch.

"I'm not a ghost," he said. "I came home yester-



day. Elsa hadn't expected to see me so soon; she thought she had disposed of me for the usual long spell. I never write to announce my coming. What's the good? Surprise enhances the feelings, whether of joy or of disappointment, felt by my friends on these occasions. It's a way of determining who are my real friends. Elsa sent me; she has an important engagement to-morrow, and she wants you to leave the club or to get some one else to take your place, so that you may attend a meeting and write a good report. I was to be sure and tell you that most of the Madeline Committee are on the thing, and very anxious to have a good notice, something that stands a chance of being copied into the other papers. So nothing will be said to your absence."

"Tell Madame Renner she may depend on me," said Tabitha, who, as soon as business was talked about, had come down from the step-ladder, and put on her professional manner.

"She always does that, I think," said Willan, smiling, and sitting down without invitation. "She was going to post the letter, but I wanted a stroll after dinner, and I volunteered to bring back an answer. You are much more comfortable here than you used to be. And you are looking so well; quite plump and rosy."

"I have Hilda now," said Tabitha, smiling. "She is a luxurious person, and we live in the lap of luxury. And it seems more worth doing things and making the house pretty for two than for one."

Willan mounted the step-ladder, and finished Tabitha's job; and as a reward she made some of the coffee for which she was famous among her friends, and they both sat down cup in hand to chat while they drank it.

"And Fewell, how's he? Has he changed his mind for a better, under your tuition?"



"Not a bit, and never will," laughed Tabitha. "I was thinking about them all when you came in. Naturally, they hold by his opinion at home; and I am held to be a dangerous lunatic at Ransham. I might harm my sister, his wife, you see, or the babies. They are only tinies, yet who can tell how early poison may be instilled? Even if they only grew up to be fond of me in a plain sort of way, it might prejudice them in favour of my doctrines. If you must associate with members of a false creed, it is better if they happen to be personally altogether unlovable."

"If they say that of you, I wonder what they would say of Elsa? Yet I remember your mother seemed more than satisfied, even grateful to Elsa."

They glided off into talk about the things that filled Tabitha's mind. And Willan, with his pleasant voice, arguing and assenting, easily led her to tell him all that he wished to know. As for Tabitha, she did not know another man who was, or who even pretended to be, interested in questions relating to women, except in so far as it may betoken interest of a sort to inveigh against the actions and misinterpret the motives of the women to whom Tabitha owed some gratitude, and gave her allegiance.

"May I come again?" he said. "Which are your evenings at home? I want to see the cousin of whom I have heard so much. I haven't seen her since the wedding. She wasn't at Benscote when I was there."

Hilda came home and went to bed. But Tabitha must do to-morrow's work as well as to-night's. It flew out of her fingers. Coffee, drunk late at night, and in the society of a talkative friend, is an excellent awakener. After the work was done, she sat thinking again, feeling keenly the lifelong want of loving sympathy. At Benscote they were fond of her, but

there was no sympathy. At the club they sympathized with her, and she with them; but where was the love? Another secretary at forty pounds a year would be found within a month, and perhaps would do all that she had done and better. Suddenly, Tabitha Vassie saw a vision of what life may be when between two human beings there is intellectual sympathy as well as personal love. As she sat there quite still her heart began to beat like a sledge-hammer, and for a moment she scarcely remembered who and what she was. Her head swam and she turned giddy, and struggled to her feet, stretching out her arms in the chilly air, towards she knew not what. It was a sudden physical impulse of which she only understood just enough to redden with shame. Her body and her mind were fighting within the limits of their short chain. And there was a third Tabitha, call it her spirit or conscience or what you will, who seemed to be looking on amazed and affrighted, torn in pieces between the combatants, and yet the arbiter of her destiny. The unknown called her. It was one of those moments when, had the unknown called in any human voice, her fate, for good or evil, might have been sealed. But she was entirely alone. Ashamed wonder left her cold and shivering. She had thought she was getting old and wise, knowing in the ways of the world, and behold! she neither knew nor wished to know all that might be hidden in herself. Terrified she dropped on her knees beside the tiny bed wedged in a corner. "O God!" she cried. "God who made me, such as I am!" The room was nothing more than a cupboard, very small and meagre. A sudden hail-storm beat in volleys on the rattling panes. Next door some men and women were laughing and joking, singing a merry song. Tabitha could almost hear their words, in that deep silence that falls now and again

even upon London on a stormy night in the smallest hours.

When she slept at last it was in sheer physical exhaustion, and she rose and went creeping about her work, ashamed, half-fearing lest her longing and her terror should have written their lines in her face. Did she look otherwise? she wondered. For she knew she would not be exactly the same again. But the men and women who met Tabitha Vassie, and who meet us, are too unobservant or too careless to notice any such change.

The rain had cleared the air, and it was a brilliant, sunshiny day, when it is not easy to detach oneself from nature and to see things gloomily. Hilda, whose views on matrimony were still, in spite of her twenty-one years, those of a healthy school-boy, began talking at breakfast time about the play.

"Dreadful rubbish! Why are the women in plays always such fools? You are supposed to like her, but no girl whom one could like but would have opened the door and asked the hero to walk out. Well, that is one comfort; the girls one knows now-a-days don't talk perpetually of their lovers and nonsense of that kind. I can't fancy you making a fool of yourself that way, can I, Tabby?"

"I hope I shan't make a fool of myself."

"Do you know, something funny happened as we were coming home. We met a lot of girls, and walked home together, and they were talking about you. They knew you at the club. They did not know who I was, and I squeezed Miss Adnitt's arm to make her not say anything. They said how clever you are, and how nice, and all that sort of thing. But what they were talking about first was the play, and marrying, and why girls don't marry, and whether women who

work care to marry. Somebody said they did; and somebody else said: 'Now, there's Miss Vassie; she's not of a marrying sort, I'm morally certain.' (I couldn't see what there was moral about it, but that's by the way.) They said you were strong-minded, and much too independent to dream of such a thing. I felt quite fond of them, though one was rather ugly; for I mean you and me to live together all our lives, and it would be too tiresome if some man came in and broke it all up."

"You need not be afraid. I dare say they are right. I think I shall not break my heart nor desert my work for any man," said Tabitha.

"And then another somebody, she was older, said that the women who work do excellent work, but they do it at the cost of their sex; they are like neither men nor women. The softer emotions are absent from their minds. 'I know it,' she said. She was very positive. What rubbish it all is! And I thought of you, Tabby. You often tell me I should be softer. I believe you feel things more than I do."

"It's a big question for so early in the morning," said Tabitha. "Perhaps in all points we are tempted like other women. And yet I don't know. It certainly is no temptation to me to go and make a fool of myself, like some women do. Who can tell? What is temptation? It's the fashion now-a-days to say that you've never been tempted to do wrong unless you've done it; and then you were tempted so sorely that you couldn't help yourself. How can you tell what other people feel. Outsiders can only see, sometimes, what they do."

"Anybody's wise enough to know that's real nonsense," said Hilda. "You are not obliged to do things when you know you shouldn't."

Tabitha wondered how far she spoke the truth. Even within herself there were depths she had not sounded. What unsuspected storms might not rage in the bosoms of outwardly quiet neighbours? She was humbly ashamed of herself, and, for my part, I think she was right so to be. It was a sudden desire, and neither a noble nor a rare one, that had awakened in her. I do not think she was fonder of Albert Willan than she had been before; but he had made her feel the meaning of things in life, not all among the noblest.

When she went out to her work, she passed a pair of lovers in the street holding hands and looking into one another's faces; it was as though a string vibrated in unison with Tabitha's self. In olden days she had been used to think that such things were silly; then she gradually changed to the opinion that they were vulgar; then she began to study such phenomena in a dispassionate way, as "things people do." Here was a bud on the tree of knowledge of good and evil. I cannot find it in my heart to be sorry that it is there; yet the fruit of that tree is of many variegated colours, and they are only a few of them lovely.



## CHAPTER XXXIV

### BROTHER AND SISTER

It was a stony and prim Tabitha who next day sat at Madame Renner's desk, writing, as the evening wore away, her account of the important meeting.

"I have been nowhere all day except to the meeting, and done nothing except write," she said shortly, in answer to Willan's questions.

"And when am I to come and see Miss Hilda? To-night? To-morrow? You shake your head. Then the next day, after working hours. And you will make me another cup of coffee?"

Miss Vassie would stay neither to assent nor to forbid. She hurried home to Hilda, who was high busy with a new microscope and a number of preparations in bottles, whose smell overpowered that of supper.

"This is the most delightful thing I've ever done," she cried. "I shall spend all my spare time this way. Why, at Benscote one might have gone on vegetating for a century and never dreamed that there was anything more in the world than what one can see. I say, Tabby! Do you think uncle ever did any microscopic work when he was young? Because if not, that would account for something he said to me the other day. He seemed to think he knew, and I was sure at the time he'd made a mistake. Everything gets so very clear if you only look into it close enough."

"I don't know," said Tabby. "Perhaps if you lived a hundred lives, things might grow plain by the end of

them all. But the more you think you've come to the bottom of the smallest thing, the more you're sure you haven't."

Willan lit a fresh cigar, and went out to meet his sister and bring her home. The streets were cool and empty, and as the sights of London had long since ceased to have any interest for him, he was undisturbed in his meditations. He went out of his way to pass Miss Meal's house, and stopped before the window, where a lady with ringlet curls and pointed nose was letting down the blind.

"Queer, to be sure!" he said, as he looked round. "Fewell always knew which side his bread was buttered; I'm dead sure they're not penniless folk. Poor little girl! And so she fell into Elsa's grip; a rum sort of guardian angel." Then he turned to the public-house, over the threshold of which men and women were passing quick, unsteady, with rolling gait, flushed faces, and loose-flying clothes. "And a child can live opposite to such a place for a year, and come out what little Tabitha Vassie is! At her age, Elsa, with less opportunity, would have learned a deal more. Not but what Elsa is an excellent sister for a man to turn to when he is up a tree."

Madame Renner was wrapped in voluminous and many-coloured folds and displeased to be kept waiting.

"Then why did you make yourself so ready before my arrival? I was in no hurry to get home."

"You know, my dear fellow, I do not introduce you to all my friends. It might lead to unpleasantness. We are better friends so. When it suits your purpose to come to England, there has been a house and a welcome; but it is better to have a clear understanding."

"As you will," he said lightly. "And I confess you

have done better with your chances than I with mine. You have earned the right to dictate terms."

"You see, I am always merciful."

They hailed a cab. "It is better so," said Madame. "I hate to be looked at as I walk. Men are such brutes."

"Yes? Were all men blind the reason for this would be less apparent, nevertheless." He touched a fold of Madame's garments.

"That is where you men mistake. It is for myself. Ugly things are abhorrent to my nature. We women who set out to show the world a better way do not mean to be singled out from the rest for our ugliness."

"No fear of that for you, Elsa."

"I am getting old," she said.

"You still count many devoted adherents. Your work this evening has been most diligently done."

Madame's face softened; I have noticed it frequently when one spoke to her of Tabitha. "Miss Vassie is a good little thing," she said; "none the worse because she is not of your sort, my dear Albert."

"That's as you may think. Perhaps not. I assure you we have made progress towards a most excellent and a close understanding."

Elsa turned to him with angry eyes. "I will not have it," she said. "Remember, that is among my dictated terms. I know the child, and there is a future before her, a peaceful future, such as a few women may have. You shall not amuse yourself by spoiling it all and making her unhappy. There are plenty you can amuse yourself with without my little secretary."

"I had dictated those terms to myself," he said. "You might have spared yourself the trouble of repeating them. I do not intend to make Miss Vassie unhappy, nor to do her harm."

"Don't speak riddles," she said. "What do you mean?"

"A bit of an old story, I knew her brother-in-law years ago; suppose that I owe him a turn and take this way of paying it! I hope I am in the habit of showing decent gratitude to you and the rest of my friends."

"Then there are two reasons for leaving the child to herself, which are always better than one alone," said Elsa. "Story or no story, you'd never have known her but for me."

"On the contrary, you forget that I'm in the position of a private friend, since Fewell's hospitable behaviour. They were kindness itself, I can assure you. I have an open invitation to go again. Mrs. Vassie did me the honour to consult me about her daughters."

"Mrs. Vassie's a fool."

"That's as may be; not worth discussing between us two. You honour me with no confidences; yet I know well enough that *The Woman Patriot* is on the brink of collapse. What happened at the meeting to-night?"

"There were influential people there," said Elsa reluctantly. "I think I made some impression. But I got no distinct promise of support for more than a few weeks. It has not paid its expenses for a long time. They would give up at once, but that counsels are divided, some leaning towards reconstruction with a new editor, and hooks baited with succulent morsels for the public, who'll perhaps swallow that way much novel and in itself unpalatable food, social and political."

"It is what I have advised oftentimes," he said.

"And what I have as often refused," she retorted. "If you have a good cause, why smother it in vulgarity and trivialities? Better have a few whole-hearted adherents than half the world misunderstanding."

"Yet the pennies even of the fools and knaves count, happily, when settling day comes."

"I have no patience with such people," said Madame Renner.

"Many a true word is spoken in jest. We all know that. What is the next move to be?"

"I have had my salary so far. I shan't get it much longer, unless this last effort should bring unexpected success. And one must live. I have sent for the landlord to make him some proposals. Mother and I can go abroad for a time. Living is cheap over the sea. And bread-and-cheese for two can always be made."

"But not for three? I am to shift for myself from this day forward?"

"Precisely. You save trouble of words."

"I have had things on my mind for some time. What if I persuaded your proprietors to give me over *The Patriot* and let me revive it? You have given them their doses too strong. You might in time creep back, and there would be welcome for you when you came to England: an exchange of good offices."

"You? You have always some fresh scheme doomed to failure. What do you know of such work? And what do you care about the cause of women?"

"There is Miss Vassie; she should know something by this time of the drudgery, poor child! You've taught her a trade, but made good use of her meanwhile. As for me, you forget that among my many callings over sea I've exercised that of editor for nearly as long a time as your own holding of that exalted post."

"And Miss Vassie? Is she a party to your project? I hadn't thought she would play me false. My own chances are not dead yet. I may have bought a fresh lease of life by my speech at to-day's meeting."

"I haven't breathed a word to her. As for playing



false, it is this or nothing; transformation of the thing in some one's hands or its speedy demise. When it has failed for years, why should it succeed in weeks? They only want to let you and themselves down easily. When *The Woman Patriot* was started you all loudly blew trumpets, and thought the world was going to be straightway regenerated. Granted that I care little for your cause of women as you interpret it: if I did care, could I devise a better scheme for helping it on? If it is a case of a little capital, I dare say the Vassies would be persuaded to find it. And I have a trifle laid by—a monthly cheque that I've drawn for some time from *The Piccadilly Journal*."

"You have been earning on that *Piccadilly*, and living on me?"

"For the realization of some projects a trifle of ready is necessary. The money is there, safe. Your creditors trusted you at their own risk and for their own convenience; this trifle more or less they can well afford to lose; for that's what it comes to."

"Where does the advantage to you come in? 'Nothing for nothing' is your usual motto."

"I must settle down some time. I'm sick of wandering."

"Six months hence you'll be sick of resting. So the instrument you use for your own end is to be Miss Vassie? She is only a woman; if you break or spoil her it is of no consequence? Use her and fling her away. It is sickening. I am tired of everything. But you may quite understand that nothing will be done unless I give in my adhesion to your plans; and before I do that I must sleep on it."

Old Mrs. Willan's work-worn hands tenderly divested Madame Renner of her finery and her jewels, and brushed out her long dark hair.

"I'll not believe it," she said; "not till disaster comes. My Elsa, so clever and so beautiful, and, in spite of all, so good. We have been through worse trials together, my darling, and come out of them laughing."

"And I dream always of the time when I shall make an idle lady of you, mother. Will it never come? Is that among the things that come with to-morrow?"

"Should I be half as happy? I have worked all the happiest part of my life. To wait upon you is my best pleasure. I do not work half as hard as you, and between us we suffice to live. We each do that which becomes us best. Shall I perhaps write your paper while you cook the dinner? It would all be badly done, and every one would be uncomfortable. That would indeed kill *The Patriot* quickly. Dream happier dreams, my dear."

"If Albert were more of a man!" sighed Elsa. "But he'll never do anything."

"If only I could see him with a good wife, I know he'd do well. Things have been against him," pleaded his mother.

"The things are in himself. You would toss in a good woman on the bare chance of working a miracle with that ingredient. It is like the witches who killed innocent children to mix a few drops of blood with a cure."

The old lady went into the parlour where her son was still sitting.

"It is late, and I must be up early. Do you want anything?"

"Only to see you," he said, looking up at her and smiling.

She sat down beside him, late though it was, and laid one of her hands on his. "You are not cold? Nor tired? Nor anything amiss?"

"Nothing. Elsa's in a bad way to-night."

"She fancies her paper is coming to grief. And other things have not done well lately. That was a regular something, and without it we must begin another struggle. She may even have to leave me. I can manage for myself, but a child like Elsa needs some one to love her and to take care of her, though she seems so strong."

"Would you come and live with me, and take care of me, little mother?"

The old lady smiled in his face. "I am too old to travel about. And when Elsa is gone, there will be no home for either of us."

"Elsa's not the only person who can keep a house going," he said half angrily. "She has ruined her paper only because she would not take advice, and would make it the stalking-horse for all her impossible notions. I know it might be made to succeed even yet. And she doesn't do half the work that Miss Vassie gets through."

"Miss Vassie's nothing but a child. She can't do anything much alone."

"What would you say if I were to settle down and take it and her in hand?"

"You? You, and with Miss Vassie to help and to do the drudgery that you would get so tired of? You could do it, of course, if you wish to. Do you think you could make up your mind to stay here? It would be the happiest day of my life if I thought so; but I wouldn't have you tie yourself down, and make yourself miserable, with any thought of pleasing me."

"What do you say to my having even saved some money, mother? It will do to begin housekeeping with."

"It's just like my dear boy to think of it, and deny himself."

"You and Miss Vassie are great friends, mother?"

"She is devoted to Elsa, who has so few to love her, except for what they get. And she's one of the steadfast sort; where you leave her, there you find her."

"Elsa's dreadfully afraid she should come to harm, working with me on *The Patriot*. But you think we three could get on together?"

"Come to harm? I know my boy too well. If you felt you could be happy it would be the best news I've heard this long while. Elsa and I could go away, out of England if you thought it best. Afterwards we'd come back, but it would be enough for me to know you were happy. It might be the best thing for you, Albert; as for her, it's plain she could not ask better, working as she does. You know all about her family; she has told me things at times; well placed they are, and should have money, though not as much as our family has a right to expect. And then you would be at home and I should see you oftener, and hear where you are, and what you are doing. And even you can't be always young, my boy. Time creeps on. And when one is failing it is good to have some one to care for one. Though of course it is not what we once had a right to look for."

"Not too fast," said Albert, smiling. "I am glad you do not fear my evil influence. Don't speak to Elsa; she always frowns on my projects, and whatever I propose she fancies it will not succeed. It makes a lot of difference to a man's courage."

"I never fear," said Mrs. Willan caressingly. "I know it's going to succeed in time. Time will come when all the world will know what stuff my boy is made of. And if I could see him with a good wife I should leave the world happily."

"You look ahead too far and too fast. And you who

are tired will rise with the lark while your lazy son takes his ease. Let us sleep upon it."

She stooped and kissed his brow. "Old folk do not want much sleep," she said. "Only a little gladness in our old age, if so it may be."



## CHAPTER XXXV

### THE END OF A CHAPTER

Madame Renner had just completed the make-up of her last number of *The Woman Patriot*, and she leaned back in her chair, her ink-stained hands lying idle before her, looking backwards and forwards at this parting of life's ways. Albert Willan—said in an editorial paragraph to be a literary man of considerable experience in two continents, and writer of some attractive articles in *The Piccadilly Journal*—was to be the new editor, and under his guidance an enlarged and much altered issue would appear. Madame Renner had already taken her ticket for a far part of Europe. The paper was as a child to her, and if it must fall into other and unloving hands she would rather not be at hand to see.

I have a copy of that last number now in my possession, torn and dusty and yellowed. It lies among several old newspapers in my drawer, all dead alike, yet alive not many years since with the writer's fiery indignation against wrong; and read with flashing eyes and a throbbing heart. *The Woman Patriot* is the youngest of them all. Sad though is the sight of any dead thing, and especially of anything soon dead and forgotten, there is much comfort to be drawn out of the flatness of the appeal. This article printed in heavy type first in the paper was the most uncompromising that Madame Renner, during the whole term of her editorship, had ventured upon. Sick to death of

these weeks of waiting and playing a losing game, she had flung up her hat, as it were, in a final burst of derision, and defied public opinion. I well remember one of the proprietors saying angrily, "Madame Renner never could keep a cool head. This would have done for the paper, if it hadn't been done for before." And now, ten years or so after, re-reading it, my head is cool to the point of drowsiness. And the mental comment that I make at the end, yawning, is, "Granted; what next?" According to our present-day notions, the page is packed with truisms, and platitudes, and diatribes against evils that nobody defends. I have fetched that paper out from its hiding-place to read several times when I have despaired of the triumph of my social faith; and have comforted myself with the thought of Madame Renner who wrote this dull article writhing under a state of things that no one now asks us to put up with, though she feared lest it should endure for ever. And Madame Renner is still striving, with the same unchastened vigour and amid the same unnecessary despair, to remove society's present burdens. I do not think she even has the comfort of realizing how far and fast things have moved since she sent to press that last small issue of *The Woman Patriot*, so many copies of which nevertheless remained unsold and at the disposition of me, or of any one who would carry one away to light a fire, or to store among records of contemporary history. It is very unlikely that Madame Renner has a copy wherewith to refresh her memory or her hopes; during those years of homeless wandering many more important treasures must have gone by the board.

Madame Renner was surprised to find what a large part Tabitha Vassie played in her thoughts of the past and her forecasts of the future. It was hard to strip her-

self of the girl's unselfish devotion. Most of her admirers stripped themselves off and went their way when the right moment had arrived in the course of events for quarrelling, or at least for separation. She longed to keep from the wreck Tabitha's admiring friendship. She longed also that her own opinions, filtered through Miss Vassie's mind, might still appear in the columns of *The Patriot*. In one way nothing could have suited her better than to leave Miss Vassie actually, and her brother nominally, editor of her paper; for she had not much doubt as to who would bear the burden of the work. Perhaps she was now beginning to see how much had been left by her in Miss Vassie's hands hitherto. Believing, as she faithfully did, that her paper had represented the purest thought and the truest progress, she was inclined to decide with one-half of her mind that she could not do otherwise than encourage Miss Vassie to take the sub-editorship with all the contingencies depending therefrom. Nothing can be accomplished in this world save by means of some instrument; and if you are always going to hold back lest the instrument may be blunted over a hard task, there would be an end of every plan. And talking of instruments, is there any one so ready to hand as a woman? There are plenty more when one is thrown aside as used or useless; and they are abundantly ready to offer themselves for use, though no great hope of reward or of success is promised. Madame Renner had been blamed by the world for many things she had done; but we all may be sure of the world's approval if we use a girl or woman as a means to our end: if the end is a good one we may even count on praise.

And yet Madame Renner could not make up her mind to use Tabitha. She wished the girl to have a

happy and successful life, carrying out her own ideals. Already Madame Renner had used what influence remained to her to get for Miss Vassie work; and thanks to Madame's strict supervision as to literary manner, and self-denying suggestions as to harmless matter, the name of Tabitha Vassie had appeared behind more than one article in the periodical press, the which had attracted some favourable notice from the critics of the day, and even from the critics at Benscote. Miss Vassie was therefore now in a fair way to succeed in that world where Madame Renner must now score another, and, as it seemed then, a final failure. All that Madame Renner knew made it appear certain to her that if Miss Vassie stuck to *The Patriot* and to its editor, she might do good, a little good, to the cause; but she must do harm, great harm, to herself. Would it not be better to find some pretext for quarrelling with the girl; or in the last resort to tell her everything of herself and her brother, making the worst of each doubtful episode? Through these years in London Miss Vassie had managed to preserve a Puritanical conscience, more especially in matters matrimonial, and her attitude might be reckoned upon if she could be made to realize the truth. Then Miss Vassie would be set free for a rebound, and might be trusted to settle next time far away from the cause that Madame held to be good.

"I've reached the end of this business, Albert," she said carelessly, as her brother came in. "What are you going to do next?"

"I thought of dropping in at Kerr's Mansions to-night, to talk business with my future sub. The cousin's amusing. She does not like me. Yet she condescends to wrangle perpetually, which is sometimes a good sign. Tabitha sits near me, and rests her



mind, smiling impartially on us both. Have you any message?"

"None." Madame Renner spoke firmly. "Don't go to-night! Or if you go to-night or another night, talk about nothing but business, and not much of that. No good can come of it. You had much better let her go her own way, and manage the paper after your own fashion."

"What idea have you taken into your head now? The child has no one to look after her. You're going away. If I'm not all I ought to be, I'm less of a fool than old Vassie."

"'Tis the cousin has the money, you know," said Elsa. "A hundred or so a year would be convenient to you. And she is a vigorous young woman, and will push her way. Failing me, you would find a vigorous wife useful when this fit is off and your habitual state of mind returns."

Willan made some hasty steps across the room with uplifted hand. "You may say what you like about me, or about her people; nothing against Tabitha herself. As for money, I know more about that than you can; I had it from Fewell. Money or no money, I shall go my way."

"Money or no money, you have generally gone mine!" Then Elsa changed to a pleading mood. "See here, Albert. The child's nothing to you; only one amongst many—past, perhaps present, certainly to come. But she's the one creature who trusts me, who cares for me for myself. Let me keep her. But for me she'd never have known you; and I can't have it on my soul that I've betrayed her to harm. She's so brave and patient. She's been so unhappy already."

"You're crazy, Elsa! You talk as if I were going to



ruin the child. I thought you'd got over these nonsensical fancies. She'll be as happy as the day's long; I know her."

"You can't make her happy. Your time's past. A man like you never knows a girl like Tabitha Vassie; you may know a little about women like me; not much of that though. She has sharp eyes and a white soul. She'd see through you, and then she'd break her heart. A woman to be happy with you must have no eyes, or else a soul just flecked for company. Take my advice, and think of the cousin and her money. My advice always turns out well."

"What nonsense you women can talk about one another! Hilda's eyes are like gimlets boring. I wouldn't have her for a thousand a year."

"I know. She has a sharp sight, and has already seen so much that she does not expect perfection. A woman who does not expect much might get very fond of you, Albert." Her voice quivered.

"Oh! I dare say," he answered roughly. "You like a man who is under your thumb. I've had enough of that, and am free, thank goodness. As for Tabitha, she's like other women, can't bear to be alone. She'll come down gradually, as they all do. She'll learn what men are, and all the better for not having learned till I choose to teach her. I won't argue as to the past; she's the one for me now, and would mean a new beginning. It may interest you to know that when I was at Ransham I had Mrs. Vassie's opinion and Fewell's that it's never too late for a man to mend. Fewell should know all about it; Mrs. Vassie speaks from pure theory; so opposites agree."

"Sooner than that I will tell her everything. I can but lose her myself."

"I should advise silence," said Willan gently. "I

have not wasted my time since our last little conversation. I think you will find to-morrow she will not listen even to you; and then you will have injured yourself for nothing."

"You leave me no choice but to go with you to-night," said Madame, springing up and throwing a shawl over her arm. "Before I sleep I'll tell her everything about us both. I'll tell her father that you haven't a pennypiece in the world, that you've roamed about and never done any good anywhere, and never will; and that when you've lived decently it has been on me. Whatever else of harm I have done, I will not have that child walk into misery with her eyes shut."

"You are theatrical. Under present circumstances, isn't it rather wasted? Sit down again, and turn to daily life. I can defer my visit; I'm not a school-boy to think that life ends with this term. I don't see my way to letting you go alone, yet if to-night I am obliged to go in your company, we should both be embarrassed. But we are both in the same box; it would suit your purpose much better if Miss Vassie did not know any of our old stories. There'd be a home for you to come to. And if you cross my purpose now, you will inevitably lose us both, let things turn out as they may."

"Do you think I haven't thought of that?" she asked scornfully.

"Well! then, carry out your project, and let Miss Vassie choose between us two. She may—I am not vain enough to say she will—like best the story I have to tell. Unless my judgment is entirely at fault, it would be to her an entirely new one. I think she has never heard it before."

"That may be to your disadvantage," said Elsa quickly.

"Much more likely to tell in my favour," he retorted.

"While the story you have to tell is of the gossiping sort that one hears so often."

"You should be an adept at telling your tale."

"That's a lie. I've never told it; not the tale I'd tell to her."

Elsa laughed and he turned suddenly and angrily to the door, meaning to rush for his chance.

"Look at the clock!" said Elsa. "It's not the first time you've let the right moment go over. By the time you get there they would both be safe asleep. We women don't talk except to gain time—or something. It's only for your good. You'd much better be guided by me."

He turned and came back and stood before her, his tall body swaying indecisively to and fro.

"It would never suit you to be tied down to a wife, or even to work in England. After a few months you'll want to be off, and then you'll have given hostages to fortune. Think of the fogs, the conventionalities, the supreme dulness of it all! It is easier to put your neck in a noose than to slip it out."

He hesitated and then sat down on the arm of the sofa, dropping his eyes on the carpet.

"See!" she went on. "I can scrape together enough to give you a fair start somewhere away, out of England; if you can put something to it, you may die a rich man after all. There's no chance of that under your plan. Come with me when I go, or follow me presently to Austria. A letter from Adelheid asks us both; that might do for a beginning. Do you remember those Austrian girls, that tall, dark one in particular, with the magnificent eyes? Miss Vassie is good; no one likes her better than I do. But goodness may be fatiguing; we've never seen her among better surroundings than these. I can leave mother on our

way. She is always happy with her sisters. When she can't be with us that is what she likes best; poking over two chops and a chicken in a cottage by the sea."

Willan jumped up quickly. "You forget Tabitha. I must have her. I should be a different man."

Madame Renner laughed in his face. "Forgive my laughing. It sounds so very young. I know it feels like that for the moment; but I have heard it all before, and it passes over, leaving not much of a scar. Think quietly for five minutes. There was Adelheid's cousin, and Lucinda, and—don't swear, my dear boy! I'll not complete the list if you don't wish it. I thought it might comfort you to hear of your complete recovery from previous maladies. But you men are queer creatures. It is hard to know how to please you. Anyway, knowing what a plight you'd now be in if I had not rescued you from previous scrapes, you might listen to me now, and do as I advise, entirely for your good."

"You ask impossibilities," he said, reseating himself.

"Not at all. I only ask you to wait. You can't go to-night. Don't go to-morrow. Think it over. It is never good policy to let a girl think herself too necessary. Even if you only arrange with her about *The Patriot*, you'll have her on your hands; you might find somebody better with more money. You must have capital, and the Vassies' money is a doubtful quantity." Willan paced the room, up and down, balancing his decision as he went.

"Wait. If it must be, it will be, after all. You might find yourself bound and no money forthcoming. And even I should not be here to fall back upon."

"I could promise to wait for a day or two, of course," he said, dubiously. "And what then?"

"Then that would content me for the present. It is only for your good."

"You've been a good sister to me, Elsa," he said. "And it's a little thing you ask. I promise, promise not to see Miss Vassie or to write to her for two or three days. Now you know what an opinion I have of your judgment, and what a love I have for yourself." He stood before Elsa actually smiling as he spoke. He had always such a pleasant way of conferring small favours. He banged the front door behind him, and as his hasty step went down the street, she leaned back in her chair, throwing herself consciously into a graceful pose. Life was dull and disappointing; yet she enjoyed any scene where she played a notable part, even before no spectators. Neither her own efforts nor her brother's grace and courtesy blinded her to the real situation. "He'll stay in that mind till he lights upon another," she used to say concerning him. Then she wrote two letters and posted them with her own hands.



## CHAPTER XXXVI

### DOCUMENTS AND AN INQUIRY

This was Tabitha's letter from Madame Renner—

“MY DEAR CHILD,

“I am going to write you a letter that may cause you a great deal of pain, and that it would be easier to leave unwritten. I am not sure whether after reading it you will not think most of your own pain, and will refuse to come again to see me, and say good-bye. It would only be for once, for I leave early the day after to-morrow, and who knows when and where we may meet again? It is settled that *The Patriot* shall be handed over to my brother, and he is going to ask you to help him as you have helped me. Do not accept! No good can come of it. He will do as little of good for Woman as he has done for women. He has been an anxiety to us all ever since I can first remember, and he will be the same to every woman he has to do with all his life long. This is only a freak, and will not last. So when he comes to make this proposal to you, *do not accept*. I have known him all my life; and you have been and are very dear to me; and it would be an abiding sorrow to me if through my actions or my silence you came to any harm. You can do well now without *The Patriot*; let it do without you; it won't go our way; an honourable death would have been better than a dishonourable life, when the old name will cover no meaning. Even if it costs you a great deal to say 'no,' be sure you say it. Do not

listen to Albert, who will persuade you that you can do wonders with his help; nor to my mother, who turns it round, poor dear! and persuades herself that Albert can do miracles with yours. He is not a good man, and nothing will make him into one. Never believe what they tell you that a woman can make a man into what she will. A man's future is built up out of the past. I haven't been all I ought to be myself; my past shadows my future; but the worst of my troubles have grown out of this pernicious notion that is taught to girls before they are old enough to know. We are no alembic, wherein dross may be transformed to gold. As you value your happiness, have nothing to do with *The Patriot* or its editor. There is no misery like union to the wrong man. He knows I have written to you. Come and see me if you can; there is no time to lose; and I could tell you more than I can write. Or go down to Benscote a day or two earlier than you intended, out of the way.

"Always your sincere friend and well-wisher,

"ELSA RENNER."

In an hour's time Tabitha stood on her friend's doorstep, knocking and ringing in vain. The house was empty. Mrs. Willan was gone out to do the day's shopping, and Madame Renner, who can always plan the outline of a plot, but is incompetent to fill in the details, had left the house on business. Tabitha was due at the club, and an appointment awaited her. She turned away, meaning to call again in the evening. And in the evening Madame Renner was out again, and would not return till midnight.

"She has been fretting all day, because you did not write," said the old lady. "She kept saying you would go like the rest. But now we are going to keep

you, my dear; we are to keep you, I see. I will tell Elsa. Even if she doesn't see you now, she will not lose sight of you in time to come."

Still Madame Renner's letter might have hit its mark, had it not been for a second letter that lay next morning on Tabitha's breakfast-table.

"MY DARLING CHILD,

"I hasten to tell you, by your father's express wish (he thought it better I should write to you), a very serious and important piece of news. Mr. Albert Willan came down here yesterday. I dare say you will guess what he came for. Your papa desires me to say that you have his full and free permission to act as you may be guided by your own wishes. He and I desire nothing but your best happiness, in this world and in the next. We leave you quite free, and I will not even try to forestall your answer. But, as you know, my dear child, we all like Mr. Willan, and his conduct yesterday was such as to heighten our good opinion of him. There were, he told us, in his life (as there must be in the lives of the best among us) many passages that he would now wish to have written otherwise. But I can ask for my children no better blessing than to make one whom they love happy, and to lead a fellow-creature into the way of peace. Be guided only by your own best feelings. You will have the good wishes of all who love you. We are very glad to hear that Mr. Willan has such good prospects of succeeding on this paper, where his sister appears to have so signally failed. Of course one can quite understand that a man can do that sort of important work much more thoroughly; though I am, as you may suppose, quite ready to believe that your help in the work of editing has been and will be most valuable. I shall look forward

to your letter to-morrow. Mr. Willan told us that he had important business keeping him out of town till four or five o'clock, so before you see him the country post will be gone. I have not seen Ernest more pleased about anything for a long time. Mr. Willan met him by chance on his way from the station, and naturally spoke confidentially to his old friend. And your sisters send their love. We have not told them, leaving you to tell your news yourself. But it is difficult to prevent them from guessing what may occur.

"I had yesterday a most extraordinary letter from your friend, Madame Renner. I don't know what to make of it. One would almost hope that a woman must be a little out of her mind to make such charges against her own brother. Whatever a brother has done, it is the plain duty of a sister to stick to him, and make the best of him, especially to strangers. Perhaps under the circumstances it is as well that she is leaving town. Ernest was in town for a few days last week, and was talking about her with a man he knows. She has not been altogether wise, I fear; indeed, she acknowledges as much in her letter. And though she has been very kind to you in many ways, one never feels quite the same towards a woman who has not known how to steer a straight course through the world. Mr. Willan, however, speaks at all times affectionately of his sister, although I have heard him say that she is at times imprudent and hasty in speech and action. Such things are a trial to a man, who, of course, never approves of imprudence in the woman he has to do with, though he may have had great temptations himself. Still, whatever the past has been, it is a divine exercise to forgive."

Tabitha arranged in her own mind to sit as judge

that night in an impartial court of judicial inquiry; and these were the written documents that were put in: one displayed the case for, and one that against the accused, who was expected to appear and plead in his own cause about five o'clock.

By that hour Tabitha's little room was set out with tea and flowers. She wished to start on her inquiry in an impartial frame of mind, and she wished the accused at the bar to see that she did so. Justice was to be tempered with mercy. The tea represented mercy. Tabitha's small self, exceedingly neat and severe of aspect, was to show forth justice. She had settled all the details beforehand; where she would sit, and where he; how the arguments would be heard to the end, and questions and cross-examinations would follow; and at last would come the judge's verdict, and the judge's speech addressed to the prisoner at the bar.

Setting out the table betimes, she had felt quite calm at the prospect; and it was with her eyes very wide open and fixed unflinching on the face of the accused in the doorway that she began to play her part. There was even a studied coldness in her greeting, as of one who would not seem to promise beforehand a more ready acquiescence or a more complete acquittal than the bare merits of the case should warrant. No doubt Willan saw and interpreted everything at a glance: the naive sincerity of the spread table and the bunch of flowers near the elbow of the chair where he usually sat; the hostess's best frock, in colour toning with the two pink spots that rose rapidly unbidden to her cheeks; the girl's soul through her wide-open, beseeching, yet defiant eyes. It was a display of heroism in miniature such as often forces tears and smiles to our cheeks: just such an utter miscalculation



of the forces they play with as babies show when they act soldiers in the garden and go marching out to battle; when the captain, bruised beneath his curls but with tears unshed, shams death bravely at his post behind the pump, so that the rest may feel the glory of carrying him in procession to burial, drums beating, and red-bordered pocket-handkerchiefs fluttering sadly in the breeze. It was never a far journey to touch Willan's emotions, if you could only hit on an untrodden route.

'Tabitha!' he said, with his ready smile. "My dear little Tabitha! Then you are going to let yourself be taken care of at last?"

And sentence was delivered before the case was heard.

After that there was nothing for it but to hear the case at length, suppressing, by mutual agreement between judge and counsel, all such details as might tend to throw discredit on the wisdom of the court. It is not to be doubted that Willan threw his heart into the case, arguing for his own side with intimate knowledge and considerable skill. Madame Renner, away with her friends in the country, was set aside as a prejudiced witness, who could not be cross-examined. And after all, a judge must give a verdict that disappoints either one side or the other.

So it came to pass that there entered into Tabitha's life the doubtful blessing of this love.

"Hilda is late to-night," Tabitha said, when the case was concluded and judge and counsel had given themselves over to friendly, unprofessional talk. "What will she say? She will be angry with me. She will say I have deserted her."

"Benscote will be pleased. You know I have seen them? No one could have been more kind and

motherly than Mrs. Vassie. And your father too. He was most liberal in his treatment of me, who am, after all, a person of no fixed profession. Elsa calls me an adventurer outright."

"At last they are really pleased with me," said Tabitha. "It has been a long time coming. There is nothing you can give me I care for so much as that. Even when I know in my mind I'm doing right, if they are angry, and write angry letters, it takes away all my feeling of satisfaction. Mamma wrote me such a kind letter this morning. I will show it to you; but you must not mind if she does not understand about Madame Renner—or Elsa. She will be Elsa to me for the future."

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### A HAPPY ENDING

It was the last day of the long week that Albert Willan had spent at Benscote Manor. Mrs. Vassie begged him to put off his journey home on account of wet weather; she admired heroes and travellers; but thought of them in far lands where the climate is different, and where to get wet feet and even wet through is perhaps not dangerous.

But Willan assured her that business was urgent. This few days at Benscote Manor had for him measured an eternity. Of course there was Tabitha, who is not a dull companion; but among her own people a sort of oppression and sadness hung most times over her; she was no longer the brave, self-reliant Miss Vassie upon whom so many leaned in London. And she was always disappearing on some errand of business or pleasure, disappearing into the recesses of the family life, leaving Willan to the society of her father or mother or sisters, any one of whom was only too ready to enjoy his company.

Mrs. Vassie receiving this stranger into the bosom of her family, honoured him with lengthy confidences, and sought his opinion on many doubtful points. He was far more sympathetic than Ernest Fewell, and was seldom at a loss for a well-expressed phrase or two when Mrs. Vassie spread out before him those subjects whereon her interest was centred. She talked to him about the missionaries; and desired him to

explain to her the precise differences between the Greek and the Anglican ritual; and wherein the Greek Church wandered from the truth in matters of doctrine. He began a long and minute reply, entering into detail; then catching Tabitha's eye (she had just come into the room) he stopped short and said he really knew very little indeed of such matters; he would find out the name of a book which would tell Mrs. Vassie much more than a traveller in search of sport could know. Mrs. Vassie was disappointed; she saw that Tabitha's presence had stopped the flow of words; she silently regretted that Tabitha was not more interested in such matters, and even hoped, that, after marriage, her husband would tell her of these his highly interesting experiences.

Mr. Vassie gave up his studies for a whole morning to discuss ways and means with Willan, and before lunch had acquired a high opinion of that gentleman's prospects and personality. "A very able man," he said to his wife. "Show me a woman who has as much to say for herself, and as wide a knowledge of places and things; I'll believe you then when you talk about this absurd equality." Mrs. Vassie had never talked of such a thing, unless in reprobation; but wives should have dramatic sense enough to act imaginary and sympathetic audience. Mr. Vassie felt that this projected marriage counted one to his side, the side that does not believe in strong-minded women: here was Tabitha, after all she had said, ready enough to accept the first man who asked her: "And so would they all be," argued Mr. Vassie.

The girls experienced delightful flutters when Christian names danced to and fro between them and the handsome stranger; there was all the pleasure of the unexpected with a dash of the wicked thrown in. And

if Tabby, the unlikely one, were to marry after all, no doubt their turn would not tarry. They asked Tabitha in confidence whether she wasn't dreadfully afraid of him; and their opinion of her courage went up at a bound when she declared she was not in the least afraid, and that she thought this wanderer now needed her to take care of him. Willan had walked down the village with Mary; had sauntered round the garden with Bella; had driven into Ransham with Mr. Vassie; had helped the girls to fetch the books from the station, hearing on the way much circumstantial and second-hand evidence intended to guide him to a right verdict on that long-standing quarrel between the parish and the Hall, as to the privacy or publicity of the hundred yards of lane. The girls thought this was the sort of information likely to interest men; a public matter; and Mary with Bella discoursed eagerly. Tabitha was silent, and looked up now and again into her lover's face, wondering if he were much interested. She had heard him talk on other subjects in London.

Everybody seemed so pleased with Mr. Willan that Tabitha felt the perversity of her occasional misgivings. They all took it for granted that she was "in love," and on that supposition explained each one of her actions. She had forgotten a message: "That's what comes of being in love," Bella had said, and Mrs. Vassie smiled consent. Then Mrs. Vassie had discussed ways and means, and had observed: "You won't be very well off, my darling, but a clever man can always make his way; and when you're very much in love with any one, poverty does not seem to matter."

And Tabitha had assented. "I don't mind being poor, mamma, nor working. I should miss my work if I had to give it up." But then she remembered that



she did not need to be in love to feel that, because she had felt the same before she had seen Albert Willan.

Miss Ide and the widowed sister had passed them on the road, and next day they called to get further news. The engagement was not carefully made public; yet it was not disallowed in private conversation.

"I think," said Miss Ide; "I really think that it is better for us girls to have some profession. It is quite customary now; that makes all the difference. I am trying to persuade my brother to send his girls to a good school, and to get them trained for something. I tell him they might marry all the same."

"Quite so," assented Mrs. Vassie, whose views on matrimony had altered during the last weeks, flying back to the views she had held during the early days of married life. "Then they can marry if they wish; and if they don't wish to marry there is an employment cut out for them." The theory that some girls wish to marry and cannot did not fall in with her present experience. Now that Tabitha, the most unlikely of all her girls, had found herself a partner, it was clear that girls have only to wait in order to get a free choice of married or single estate.

"What is this Mr. Willan's profession?" said the widow. "It is reported in the village that he has been on the stage."

"Mrs. Vassie smiled easily. "He has travelled a great deal. He belongs to an old Irish family; they have lost money of late, like so many others. At present he is engaged in journalism, like my daughter."

"Ah!" said Miss Ide. She did not know exactly what a journalist does; and indeed the description covers many divergent careers. She remembered an elderly herbalist living on the edge of Ransham who had astonished her by being present at the best con-

certs in the Town Hall; of whom she had afterwards heard that he got his ticket in return for writing an account to the papers. "Very nice," she said, vaguely, "to attend concerts and things. Is that a very lucrative business? I shouldn't have known." It flashed across her mind that if gentlemen's daughters were taking to journalism and talking about it openly, she might get a free ticket for the next concert and write something; she had not thought that the last report in the country paper was accurate; the singer got more praise than she deserved. And she had been wondering if she would be able to afford to pay for a ticket this season.

"Ah!" said the widow, who prided herself on knowing something of the world. "Special correspondent to the newspapers. They do travel a good deal. I hope Tabitha will like to have a husband who is always roaming about, and never at home. But she doesn't believe in staying at home, of course; I forgot. She may find out the difference."

Mrs. Vassie let the statement pass. "I should like you to see Mr. Willan," she said graciously. "I will send for him. He is leaving us to-day, I am sorry to say. My daughter stays with us a little longer. She is going with him to the station. I think they are in the house."

"Delightful drive they'll have," said the widow. "Does he or she hold the big umbrella? Quite a Darby and Joan sort of affair. I can't imagine Tabitha. But girls do such strange things now."

Still Mrs. Vassie was not disconcerted. When marriage was discussed, Mrs. Vassie could now hold up her head and give her opinion as final. The proof of the pudding is in the eating; neither Mrs. Ide nor her daughters could give any useful advice, for no one

could approve either the appearance or the flavour of the productions of the Priory.

Willan said that half-an-hour in Miss Ide's company would be the last straw breaking the willing back. He suddenly discovered that the Benscote clocks were all a quarter of an hour too slow, and that Tabitha must put on her hat without delay.

"It was just such a day when I first went to London," said Tabitha, looking out of the school-room window. "It seems so long ago. I shall never forget how forlorn it all looked, and how my heart failed me."

"Thank goodness, we've nearly done with Benscote now. I wonder you survived it. I don't wonder that you broke away."

Tabitha hesitated.

"I don't want you to fancy that I shall be happy never seeing them," she said. "They've been kinder to me this time than ever I can remember since I was a little girl. And I thought you liked them all as much as they like you."

"Or as much as I like you, eh? My poor little Tabby!" he said, smiling down at her serious face. "Did I take you in too? It was all for your sake. Now you know how much I care for you. For a week I've been such a good boy. I've talked daughters with your mother, and religion with your sister Mary, and fashions with Bella. As for the children, I've invented plots of stories enough to keep the *Patriot* going for years. I've even flirted with old Miss Ide—all to please you, Tabby. I deserve no end of a reward."

"Wasn't it all true?" said Tabby.

"True! There's only one thing true of the whole lot; that you're my own dear little girl, and that if you hadn't been nearly an angel you'd never have stood a

lifetime of it so well. You seem like a changeling among them all. I don't believe you ever did belong to them at all."

"I want to belong to them," said Tabitha. "And I did think you liked them."

"My dear little girl, it's silly and morbid to dwell upon what they like or don't like. You belong to me now. We have made up our minds to live our lives together, and to let all the world go. On one occasion I'll come most joyfully to Benscote; then I shall carry you off, and you'll be my dear little wife. We'll have a jolly time, and forget all about the rest. It's a mercy your father does like me, for if he didn't he would not act so handsomely by us, and we need all we can get. I like them well enough; but I don't want more than a week; and I mean to have a whole lifetime of you, my dear; that's all the difference."

"I wish I always knew what you like, really," said Tabitha with an anxious face. "You seemed so happy all the time. It gives me such a feeling of not being certain. And I might one day not please you and not know."

"No fear of that. You always please me. Tabby, a man's not a brute. Should I say to your mother, 'This place of yours at Benscote is the dullest hole I ever was in in my life; only a woman or an angel could stand it?' "

Tabitha sighed.

"Then you don't think it was too horrid of me not to want to stay here always? I was afraid sometimes you didn't understand why I find it impossible. But I do like my home too when somebody understands."

"Somebody understands; never fear. To a girl of your sort such a place is prison. You've got the best head in the family, and you shouldn't take it all so

meekly. You encourage tyranny; I might even become a tyrant myself."

"I'm not afraid of that," said Tabby, smiling. "I don't think you could unless I made you, and then it would be my fault."

And then he laughed and kissed her, with no idea that she had spoken the truth, and that hers and not his was the strength of mind and fixity of purpose that may make a tyrant of self or another. "I shall take them now; you'll be too shy and proper to kiss me at the station when we say good-bye," he said.

Suddenly, at his touch, Tabitha, usually so calm and self-contained, turned and clung round his neck. It moved and interested him deeply. No other creature upon earth had power to stir the depths that lay beneath her placid surface, perhaps none suspected that there were depths to stir. It gave him confidence in himself, content with his own measure of power, to feel that this girl upon whom so many leaned, now leaned upon him. Folks said she was cold or unmanageable or unloving; but he knew better. And if it be a matter of pride to tame the strange creature called woman, surely the most credit is due to those who tame species hitherto deemed incapable of domestication? It was no longer the reasonable, strong-minded Tabitha who cried: "Be good to me, my dear; always be good to me! Promise! I am so tired of being alone; so tired of being always blamed and always found fault with. Love me, dear, not a little, but a great deal. No one really cares for me here. Take me away with you, ever so far, where we can just love one another, and be together! I'll not want you to bring me back. They'll not miss me. I'll do everything you want me to if only I'm not to be alone any more. I feel as if something dreadful were going to happen,



and I can't tell what; and you are going away." There was nothing for him to do, more than any man must have done. He put his arms round her, and kissed her, and soothed her, wondering at the startling variety of women and women's ways, and congratulating himself that there would be no trouble in weaning his wife from Benscote.

She was sad and silent that evening. Mary whispered to Bella: "She doesn't like parting with Albert, even for this little time. She must be very much in love."

Hilda, so they all said, made less of Mr. Willan's charm because she had not seen him at Benscote, and did not get on extremely well with him in London. She declared that Tabitha was ill. "Girls don't sit and shiver just because they are in love," she said. "Tabby's been in bad spirits for a long time, just in the state to take anything. And she's never recovered that illness. My train was ever so late, and she sat and waited for me, and got wet through. I feel sure she's ill. Why couldn't one of you others take that man to the station?"

"Naturally Tabitha wished to go herself," said Mary, modestly.

"Now that you no longer live here at Benscote," said Mrs. Vassie, "we still manage to live our lives with more or less success. When you are older I have no doubt that you will better understand many things. At present I think it is very natural that your cousin Tabitha should be out of spirits to-night. It is a very serious step that she is contemplating, and of course when Mr. Willan is here she thinks less of the future and is content with the present. Now comes the reaction."

"A very serious step," said Hilda. "I'm quite with you there, aunt. I don't like the man."

"Hilda is a man-hater," said Bella. "'We all know that."

"It doesn't matter what I am or what I'm not," said Hilda. "'The thing is, whether Tabby's ill."

Mrs. Vassie smiled serenely. "'I managed somehow to bring up a large family before you were born, my dear," she said, "and I think I need not come to you to teach me now. Really the young girls of the present day are extraordinarily conceited. I do not require your help in managing my household, not in the least."

"I should be a fool if I didn't know more about illness than some people. What else should I know if not that?"

"Thank you, my dear. But if you don't know better than to call your aunt a fool, you had better leave the room."

"I called you nothing of the kind, aunt. I said I should be a fool. I have had opportunities of learning such things, and you haven't." But she left the room and went down to the kitchen and fetched coals and lit a fire in Tabitha's room, and, in her best professional manner, asked Tabitha a great many questions.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### SOME VIEWS CONCERNING ILLNESS

Those who have had ten children and reared them all naturally expect them all to go on living at the end of thirty years. Mrs. Vassie made up her mind that Tabitha had caught a little cold, but that there was nothing to be frightened about. She was not anxious. The children, as children, had often been put to bed before tea, but they had always awakened better in the morning, except when they had been sickening for measles and whooping-cough, and these maladies had passed over Tabitha years ago, in the good old nursery days, when Mrs. Vassie felt herself undisputed mistress of the situation. As she went down-stairs in the morning, she thought gladly that Tabitha would learn a lesson by this slight illness, seeing how much more comfortable she could be at home than in her own rooms. And all illness, in Mrs. Vassie's opinion, is a deliberately chosen instrument for fixing in our minds moral lessons, for the sake of which illness should be gladly endured, perhaps even made welcome.

"I fear Tabitha is not so strong as she once was," said Mrs. Vassie, knowing that for children it is always wise to point a moral, lest they should fail to learn the lessons of life. "You others are stronger, but she chose to go out in the world, against her father's and my wish. And she will bear the consequences as long as she lives."

"Tabitha in bed?" said Mr. Vassie. "It makes a great deal of work with so many of them in the house."

"She'll be all right to-morrow," said Mary. "It's nothing, papa."

"Even if it were more than that, the girls could wait upon their sister, now there are so many of them in the house. I'm sure we've been greatly favoured by Providence that we've had so little illness."

"I hope she's not going to have something," said Mr. Vassie. "Illness is such an expense, and Hooper knows how to run up a bill. It was only last week I sent him a cheque for attending me when I had that attack. With so many of them, if it isn't one thing it is another."

"She's only a little out of sorts, papa; nothing that we can't treat by simple home methods. It will be good practice for Hilda; she's going to be a doctor, so she can't begin too soon to be attentive to sick people. And if she's going to be a doctor, I suppose it will be little slight things like this, that people will send for her for. One would prefer a man in a serious case. Men are so much more able to judge of things; with women it depends upon how they feel at the time, whether they are well, or out of temper."

"Aunt!" cried Hilda, running down late to breakfast. "I know Tabby's very ill. I wish you'd come and see her for yourself, since you don't believe me. I've lit her fire. She must be kept warm."

"You get so excited," said Mrs. Vassie. "And if I had thought a fire necessary I would have told you to light one. You seem to forget who is mistress in this house."

Mrs. Vassie went on with her breakfast leisurely, for it does not do to let these young folks see that they have power to upset our plans. Nevertheless her heart

sank. Tabitha might have caught a very bad cold, and be in bed for some days; or she might even have a rheumatic attack, such as Mrs. Vassie herself once had. Worst of all, it might be something "catching," which would upset the house dreadfully, just when the boys were coming home, and when Mr. Vassie was settling down to study after the infrequent interruption of visitors.

"Has she a sore throat?" said she, with a pang at her heart. Then without waiting for an answer she went on: "I wonder you care to ask for my opinion since you think so much better of your own. I will come and look at her to please you. I dare say there is nothing the matter."

Tabitha sat shivering by the fire.

"You have caught a violent cold, that is what you have done," said Mrs. Vassie, with some reproof in her voice. "You had better go back to bed and stay there."

"Perhaps I shall be better presently," said Tabitha.

She laid her hands on Tabitha's head and felt her hands.

"You're not in the least cold. Hilda has lighted the fire now, but there wasn't the least necessity for it." She felt less light-hearted than she pretended to be, but she tried to laugh as she said: "We shall have Geoffrey here this afternoon; you can consult him, Tabby. A student should know something of simple ailments like a cold."

"Geoffrey knows no more about things than I do," said Hilda. "I wish you would send for Mr. Hooper and have done with it. You'll believe him, though you won't me."

"Perhaps so, my dear. Naturally I think a good deal of my own boy's opinion. Mothers are very foolish persons in your eyes, I dare say, my dear. And I'm



old-fashioned. I have always been accustomed to a man as my medical attendant. And I must say that what you show me of women doctors does not prepossess me in their favour." She turned to go; then fighting not only against Hilda and all the host of modern ways, but also against her own unconquered fears, she said briskly: "I have no doubt you will be better by the evening. We shall have you down in the drawing-room and quite yourself again."

Mr. Vassie heard nothing about the matter till he came in to the early dinner.

"She's better; I'm sure she's better," said Mrs. Vassie. "And it shall not interfere with you, papa dear. I shall take care of that. The girls will be glad to help if there's anything extra to be done, but there won't be. Tabitha only has a cold, and what's a cold?"

"Well, poor girl, it's better for her here with her sisters to wait upon her than alone in town. Hilda's all very well, but I shouldn't like her to nurse me."

"Tabby won't have anything," said Hilda, coming in and beginning without comment on her plate of cold meat. "She pretends she's better, but I know she isn't."

"Do eat your dinner, and perhaps you'll take a more cheerful view after," said Mary in an undertone.

Mrs. Vassie began talking in a loud voice.

"One of the girls went down the village, papa. Widow Neate's son has come home from the soldiering, and is going to settle down for good. I hope he'll not lead the servants astray."

"Pity he shouldn't find something away to do. A fellow who's been all over the world fighting is not much good in a place like this. He'd better have stayed where he was."

"Stay buried in a heap with a lot more dead men," said Hilda.

"Hilda! Don't! At dinner-time, too," said Bella.

"The Widow Neate has parish pay," continued Mrs. Vassie, carrying her chosen topic on to the accustomed lines which it had threatened to run off in consequence of Hilda's obstruction. "Half-a-crown a week is not much to live upon, even for those sort of people, and she will be glad if her son brings her a little more comfort."

"I should think he must, if he lives at home," said Mary.

"Unless he drinks. Soldiers often do," said Bella. "And then the poor old thing will be worse off instead of better." Bella ate her pudding smiling as she spoke. She had what was called a bright face, and many found it a pleasure to look at her.

"A dutiful son will feel it a pleasure to live with his mother, and tend her during her few remaining years. She can't be long for this world at her age."

"In that class of society sons have a duty; in ours it is chiefly daughters," observed Hilda.

"The sense of parental obligation is nowhere as strong as it should be," said Mr. Vassie. "And I cannot imagine that it would be strengthened by long residence in a tropical climate."

"Yet hot countries have furnished a few saints," said Hilda.

"Poor old thing! You might take her a nice pudding to-morrow, Mary. It would be a nice object for a walk, if it is fine."

"I like better to go out when there's something to go for," said Mary, who had made the same remark some hundreds of times from the same place. But too many rules for conversation are impossible to keep. And the first in use was that no one should say any-

thing from which an older person could disagree. It is easier to know whether a remark will disagree if it has been tried many times before. A rule against frequent repetition was therefore not passed.

"I think the widow is a little cross at times," said Mrs. Vassie.

"Poor old thing! She doesn't like sago as well as rice."

"Eighty is a great age to live to," said Mrs. Vassie.

"If she lives to next birthday she'll be eighty-three."

"Has every one finished?" said Mrs. Vassie, looking round. "If so, Hilda must ring the bell."

"I'm going to sit with Tabby," said Hilda.

"Hilda and her uncle never get on now," sighed Mrs. Vassie to her elder daughter. "If only Hilda had been a boy! Dear papa is so clever, and Hilda is clever too. And none of the boys take after their father, so it would have been a pleasure to your papa to have a nephew who took an interest in things."

"I'm sorry too that Tabitha was not a boy," said Mary. "I've thought of it often. By this time she'd have been quite distinguished, I dare say. I wonder what she'd have been! A lawyer, perhaps, or even gone into Parliament."

"There's a mistake somewhere," said Mrs. Vassie, with gentle and quite unconscious blasphemy. "But I hope it will turn out for the best. And of course when Tabitha's married it will make a great difference. You don't notice so much then whether a woman's clever or not."

Mother and daughter sewed and read aloud, and passed the afternoon as they had passed hundreds before. No shadow of impending calamity hung over them. As things had been for so many years, so they

thought they would be to the end; they rejoiced to believe that there was no new thing under the sun. And in the evening Geoffrey came and the school-boy; they talked and made merry in the drawing-room, and Mr. Vassie took up a book and laid it down again, saying it was impossible to read anything serious amid such a clatter. That evening was vividly impressed on all their minds. They were more merry, not less, because Hilda stayed away with Tabitha; and as they were not accustomed to have either of the girls at Benscote they did not miss them now. It was quite late before Mrs. Vassie remembered to ask Geoffrey to give his semi-professional opinion on his sister's state, so late that they all agreed it would be better to wait till the morrow. It never must be laid to Geoffrey's charge that he, on this important occasion, made a wrong diagnosis, and cried peace when it was war against death.

Poor Mrs. Vassie! It seems always as though it were she who was in fault. And yet, if fault there were, and not pure misfortune, I think it should be laid at the door of her theories rather than of her judgment. She considered illness only as a moral factor, and she naturally only expected it to come when a good moral consequence could plainly be anticipated. Now an excellent moral consequence might have come from a slight indisposition affecting Tabitha; but no good was to be expected from any severe malady, or at least no good that Mrs. Vassie could be expected then to recognize. Hilda was the third actor in the drama; and it could not be for Hilda's moral benefit to be proved, in so important a matter, once more in the right, when all her elders and betters were once again in the wrong. To show that Tabitha had nothing really the matter with her became with



Mrs. Vassie a point of personal honour; and she could not and would not believe that God and Nature would fail in the last resort to back her in this, her rightfully chosen position. If Hilda had not been there, or, being there, had held her tongue, it is possible that Mrs. Vassie would sooner have taken fright and precautions; but she, like the rest of us, had to act under the conditions in which she found herself. As it was, Geoffrey had much ado to communicate his tardy alarm to her mind; and when at last he had done so she felt hurt, thinking that his youthful professional instincts had got the better of his filial confidence.

"For such a trifling ailment, my dear boy, I should have thought you must have known what to do," she obstinately repeated. "Or Hilda; she professes to be very learned when it suits her purpose. There's really nobody to send conveniently this morning; and it worries papa so much to disturb him in the middle of his studies; and he can't bear having a doctor in the house. It was a long time before he would send for one, even when he was ill himself."

The difference between Hilda and her aunt was not superficial, but fundamental. Hilda and I hold that illness is a work of the devil, and only in a very round-about way, if at all, do we look that any good shall spring out of it; we never, I think, really expect as much good of any kind as we should have expected keeping well. Mrs. Vassie, on the contrary, believed that illness was a gift of God, like many other gifts, more or less arbitrarily bestowed; and like many other persons of naturally managing turn, she held that her understanding of and beliefs concerning the Divine purpose were in some way necessary to its fulfilment. Faith, in such a matter, meant to her believing, against evidence if needs be, that events outside her



control would happen as she would have wished them to happen had she had the ordering; and, above all, faith to her meant that all things should work together towards the consummation which she ardently desired. She had prayed and striven that Tabitha might come at length to a right and dutiful mind, and that her engagement to Mr. Willan might work out to that particular end. Far be it from me to say that the prayer was not answered; I think it was. But I am sure that the chief force of the blessing fell, as the blessing of prayer does, on the head of the suppliant. For my analysis of what Mrs. Vassie understood by faith will never, at any future time, be quite so true again. And never again, after that last merry evening, did this perplexing world look plain in Mrs. Vassie's hitherto satisfied sight.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### A NEW BEGINNING

As for bodily symptoms, those who relish such information may turn to medical works, and there read under the appropriate heading the probable course of such a complaint acting on a woman of Tabitha Vassie's age, constitution, and habits. It all turned out just as one might have expected. They said there was excessive weakness, utter prostration, no strength to rally, and the like. One may well believe it. Mental symptoms have to me always been a more interesting study; and I carefully record the fact that during the few days that Tabitha's illness lasted, she lay mostly silent and motionless, taking very little notice of what Hilda or Mary did for her, yet never seeming quite easy in her mind, nor losing that drawn and anxious expression of her countenance, unless Mrs. Vassie was in the room, or sitting by the bedside, touching Tabitha now and again with her large, bony, motherly hand. Behind her caress Infinity hovered.

So it all came back to this in the end; to mother and child, to human love and earthly confidence, to the shadow of the things hoped for, and behind all the mistakes and misunderstandings of this century or that, to the abiding facts of all time.

As for Mr. Vassie, he wandered up-stairs on one or two mornings—there was no time for more prolonged departure from his habits of a lifetime—and looked at Tabitha, and found nothing to say. He had never had

anything in common with the girls, and they did not want him now in their extremity. He wandered down again into his study, and locked the door. But I thought when they called him out to eat that his eyes were red, and he looked like an old man. No one dared speak to him; he had chosen to live his life alone; and to go on being that which we have allowed ourselves to become is the sorest punishment, and the inevitable.

They sent for Willan when it was too late; and he was wandering away from London, his mother and sister did not know where. Fortunately, Tabitha never asked for him; she asked for nothing; she seemed to have passed beyond or behind all the events of the last months. He came later, adding a touch of romance to the sad story, and feeling hopelessly out of accord with the family to which his life was to have been so closely united. Philosophy came to his aid, and taught him that Elsa was right, and that he had not the wherewithal to make Tabitha Vassie permanently happy, nor she him. It was better as it was; only an interlude, but the sweetest and purest of all the many that Mr. Albert Willan treasures the memory of. He came once again to Benscote, and then he and they fell apart for ever, cohesion between such opposites being impossible.

So Tabitha Vassie died, and was buried in Benscote churchyard, where you may still see her tombstone, a handsome erection in marble, the only thing ever bought for her upon which no expense was spared, and upon which is written the inscription: "Then are they glad, because they be quiet."

Mrs. Vassie chose it, in the first ebullition of her grief, saying that now she was at ease about Tabitha's future, and that now she and the child were both of

one mind. She represented Tabitha as being by death endowed with those qualities that she still believed the best for a woman. To us it was very pathetic; we wanted our Tabitha, and not an unfamiliar saint. But you could not expect Mrs. Vassie at her time of life to change her ideal of virtue, or to praise a woman on a tombstone for righteousness, or love of truth, or judgment. It should have sufficed us that peace reigned between those two at last, and that no bitterness of feeling lay between the victorious victim and the sorrowing parents whose action had led to so complete an effect.

Tabitha Vassie died; and I confess that, had its end been otherwise, I should probably not have written her story. But in her little world, even among the girls of whom Tabitha was a leader and a comforter, this sudden death caused much perplexity of mind. It is always so. The leader falls, and all the vulgar rush to the funeral, and say, as Bella Vassie said: "I thought so. I thought Tabby would fail. This is what comes of setting oneself up against the people who have the power. She'd much better have done like everybody else."

And Mary commented: "Dear Tabby! She was so clever. Well! in heaven, where she's gone, nobody is cleverer than the rest, I suppose. And so she's quite happy now."

This she said to Abraham Sawday, who continued to ride out of Ransham almost daily for news to send to his sister—or so he explained his own action. I fancied Miss Sawday was not over anxious for the next news now that her friend was gone. Abraham Sawday did not contradict Miss Vassie. He is a fond fellow, women and heaven lying close together in his imagination. And Tabitha earned and bequeathed to her sisters

many unexpected legacies, of which no doubt the most valuable and the most lasting was this exemplary young man.

True enough; this is what it means to set oneself up against constituted authority. And yet heroes have in all times disregarded the fact. Heroes and martyrs have in most cases died in a sudden, common sort of way, when their followers hoped they were going to go on living. Nor, I suppose, did they look heroic as they lay with their dead eyes staring up to heaven. And there were always unheroic men enough to mock and to feel the world cooler and more uncomfortable now that the fire of their eyes was departed. Nevertheless Hilda spoke the unalterable truth when she burst out: "It is what comes, and will come, to be sure. Yet earnest effort can't fail—especially if you cut the rebel's head off."

Given leaders and men or women ready to die sooner than give in, and no cause ever fails. Blood must needs to be shed for the watering of the seed of all progress towards perfection. And inasmuch as martyrdom is impossible without persecution, so even the persecutors play their useful part; their earnest effort fails no more than the rest. There is a certain grandeur, if you look for it, even in Dame Partington who dared to face all the fury of the ocean with only her mop in her hand. Better have courage in a bad cause, than be a coward in all causes. If the dull majority can see nothing else it is to be hoped that it will at least see this: there is something more than a mere fad or theory in a faith for which women of Tabitha's calibre are glad to work as Tabitha did, and to die as Tabitha died.

As for the piteous waste of it all, your opinion of that depends upon how you see things, chiefly how you



see this world and the next. If you think that these petty strifes and efforts are all, are an end in themselves, then it does seem pitiful indeed that Tabitha Vassie has gone from among us. But if to you, as to me, this life is merely a place of education, or rather an episode in our time of education, then Tabitha has only been passed on because during her few short years she learned her lesson so completely. I do not think that my heroine was perfect; far from that. It is easy to say that she might have done better in some chapters of her life. But academic criticism is always easy, and most futile. She had her own work to do, and her own wits to guide her. It may be in part because Tabitha and those like her lived and died that we other women have had a chance of developing and expressing the judgment for the occasional absence of which we blame her so foolishly. I do not think that a habit, continued during a quarter of century, of obedience to an unwise woman, especially if that unwise woman be a mother, is likely to develop the power of wise counsel. Why should it? What is there either in inheritance or in training to warrant such an expectation?

Even I, with my dim eyes, can perceive that somewhere, far above our small experiences, Tabitha Vassie may be growing and developing into a, to us, unimaginable perfection. All I say is that I think she had done her work and learned her lessons here. There was not much before her. After such a breakdown she would probably have lived a life under all the disadvantages of ill-health, and I am unable to see, what I often hear talked about, that feebleness of body tends towards spirituality of mind. Tabitha had courage enough, heaven knows, to endure bodily discomfort with a smiling face. Her most unsympathetic critics could not say that she was overburdened with desires

of the flesh. I think I see that she had suffered enough, and I am glad she has gone, glad that she left behind her only few lines of writing, and not even a single account-book that could bring home to the dull consciences of her friends and relations any clear perception of the suffering that they had forced upon her, whereby they had passed her out of life.

I have no desire to here offer my opinion as to the final issue of the social war still raging round us. I only say that in Tabitha Vassie's case death did not spell failure. She had been harried to death, and we all knew it. We talked about it and told about it, and everybody saw. I suppose it is as certain as anything can be that Tabitha would be alive now if she had only had enough to eat, and if those who loved her had refrained from worrying her, and had had that faith in her which to us came so naturally. Some one said to me the other day that Tabitha Vassie was an instance of woman's incapacity for sustained intellectual effort. "Lots of men," so my interlocutor assured me, "have done the work she did, and not one of them dies." Yes; and "lots of men" have gone through a period of starvation during early manhood, and have come out of it with their bodies not much the worse and their minds greatly the better. I do not say that such things are common among men of the Vassies' type; but they cannot be unknown to men who now never talk about them. But men who struggle on against such odds have the world of books and legend to cheer them on their way, or at worst have letters from home full of love and hope and admiration, and faith in their future. His mother may not sympathize with a hero's actions, but she does share his ideals; she does not call him hard names because he has found out that she, fifty years old,

sitting at her work-table and darning his socks, has not a full knowledge of the ways of the wide world in which he, at five-and-twenty, must push ahead. She trusts him; she cheers him on; he believes in himself because he will not disappoint his mother. Poor Tabitha! There was no one to believe in her save the teachers who did not fail to see what a sound intelligence she possessed, save the girls who came to weep at her feet, and whose courage she reilluminated by embers from her own heart, where the flame at times burnt grievously, perilously low. Her life and her death proved, as to woman's strength of body, nothing except that this woman never had a fair chance. They proved a good deal for some of us, as to one woman's strength of mind. And she would be the first to say that her life and work were not wasted if they gained for women less strong than herself the right to try in an easier way.

And if, demanding poetic justice, and loving Tabitha, you call down retribution on the head of those who let Tabitha die, there is no need to call in vain. Tabitha dead looks like the ideal daughter. What might she not have done had she only had a bare chance? And when Mrs. Vassie finds children not to her mind, when she has long evenings by the fire, and there is little to look forward to and less to talk about, then she longs for Tabitha, for her fearless opinions, for her strong will, for her self-abnegation, for her faithfulness unto death. She is warm; and she thinks how Tabitha went cold. She is fed; and she knows that Tabitha worked hungry. She is living out a long old age and the child Tabitha died in the prime of youth. It is bitter, bitter. A woman out of whom such tribulation can thrash nothing is not to be gathered among the good wheat.

Mr. Vassie sought and gave no confidences. More and more he shuts himself up alone, and what he studied or thought about, no one will ever know. Sometimes I have hoped that he recognized the mistakes that he made in his share of the everlasting battle between the old and the new; and that, shut up in his study, he suffered a remorse. At other times I have feared that nothing has or will alter his mind; and that he has lived, and grown old, and will die thinking his fixed self right and all the rest of this moving world wrong; to which belief I am lothfully chained by the set phrases about society, and women, and work, and the like, which he has uttered continually since I first knew him, and goes on still repeating now. Yet, if he had not been so lazy a man, I think he would have been a good Christian. So far as one may stretch without effort I think he stretches to the highest he knows. It is an awful punishment to do the worst while desiring to do the best, and more awful still to have done the worst and afterwards to recognize it as that, and irremediable. Yet who would not choose such punishment rather than to do the worst and not to know; to pass through life and beyond it, still mistaking evil for good? I confess to no sympathy with those who long to see their adversaries punished. There is always punishment enough; and the keenest punishment comes in the places where it does not show.



## CHAPTER XL

### THE ORIGIN OF A NEW WOMAN

Years passed before Hilda went again to Benscote. In her imagination nothing of Tabitha was abiding there. It was to London, in the little home Tabitha had planned and toiled for, among the women who had prophesied of Tabitha's future, and the girls who had been gladdened by her life; even among the streets and crowds where Tabitha had lingered and loved and moralized, that Hilda turned for consolation when slowly and painfully she began to build up again her shattered faith from the bottom. I take it that most of our personal beliefs are grouped round one central postulate, that to us appears impregnable. That one fact of facts, Tabitha's life and untimely death, had rooted itself in the very centre of Hilda's mind. All else, every relation of man to man, of man to woman, of man to God, must make place for that, and fit in with that. The conventionalities had killed Tabitha; she shook the dust of conventional life off her feet, for with Tabitha's murderers she would have neither part nor lot. Whatever else in this blundering world might be right, they, at least, were wrong. A conventional world that held no place for Tabitha was a wicked world. It was enough for Hilda to know that any course of action was usual; at once she forsook it. Any opinion of the majority flew in direct antagonism to hers. Old-fashioned notions had injured Tabitha, therefore, for Tabitha's sake, she would wage war against them all, so long as she had breath in her



body. Premisses that led to so disastrous a conclusion must be false premisses. And when we tried to tell Hilda that ignorance and stupidity, and not logical wickedness, was responsible for the blunder, she said that she could not be expected to follow ignorant or stupid guides; they had failed once to find a way, they would fail again.

"Does any sensible person ask advice," she said, "unless it is likely to be wise, and judged on a full knowledge of the case?"

It all happened a good many years ago, but Hilda is young yet; still hot for battle, and disinclined to sign a peace with those whom she takes, or mistakes, to be the enemies of progress. Equipped in mannish garments, she is still out in the wilderness seeking truth and justice and righteousness—to make theory and practice square; to cause equity to reign between the old and the young, between brother and sister, between man and wife; to determine what is right to do, and not what is commonly done. And still she lends a ready ear to every one who proposes to tell her of a better way. For my part, I think she is quite as likely to find out the truth as those who sit at home and never seek anything.

This picture of a world that could so contentedly let Tabitha Vassie die must, I think, arouse some spasmodic ire even in us, who are of that world, and who have never shared Tabitha's aspirations or her struggles. Yet Tabitha is dead, and beyond need of us. Tabitha's cousin remains an irreconcilable. I meet her, clad in a uniform to me detestable, swinging along the high roads, or even invading my quiet parlour; I see her in unfamiliar attitudes, and in places from which young women, in my opinion, had best absent themselves; I hear her loud voice in discussions

beyond her understanding, or in tirades against my cherished and proved faiths. And then, in a queer contradiction of myself, I not only forgive her for Tabitha's sake, but presently even forget all these trifles, in admiration for the womanly heart, which, under all this thin disguise of manly behaviour, is so plainly to be seen throbbing with passionate pity for the oppressed.

THE END





